MOMO
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The discovery of individuality
A short history of human personal identity

Lecture at MoMo Berlin by Wolfgang Sohst on January 26, 2015

A. Introduction

The other day I asked a little girl of about 18 months, the daughter of good friends, who was playing with her doll: "Tell me, who are you?" She looked at me with wide eyes. Then she turned back to her doll and said firmly, "I play with my doll!" I said, "Okay, you're playing with your doll. But who are you?" She looked at me a bit annoyed and said, "Mama is just shopping, and dad is playing with me tonight." Then she began to put her doll to bed.

This is obviously not the answer I would get from a woman or man of my age. It is not what I would have expected either. I believe that this child was exhibiting a kind of personal identity common to young children. However, the question that arises is about how human identity evolves as we grow up. In other words, from an anthropologic point of view, how has human identity developed until it became what we now commonly see as a) the difference between "I" and "we", and b) at the same time as a partial unity of both of them?

In this essay, I argue that modern human identity is composed of two parts, an individual and a collective one. We experience some contradictions between those two parts almost every day, but under normal circumstances, we have learned how to deal with them. Anthropologically, this composition has arisen from a preceding unity, which I call "proto-identity". I will show how a trauma between mother and child forced our identity to split, and how from then on, humans had to cope with a double nature of their identity: their individual and their collective one.

Based on this initial assumption I pose the question: What caused the antagonism between individual and collective identity? To this end, I firstly present a psychoanalytic and anthropological hypothesis about the origin of this split. I will then present the development of this antagonism, especially of the collective part of that identity, in the western cultures until the present day.

The initial hypothesis is: The difference between collective and individual identity emerges from a previous situation that has been indifferent as to that. Primates and human babies still exhibit this preceding form of identity. 'Collective identity' refers to all kinds of socially active groups and organizations, e.g. political parties, business corporations, sports clubs, informal groups identified by commercial brands and fashion habits etc. ''Individual identity' refers to all kinds of the self-conception *within* such collectives.
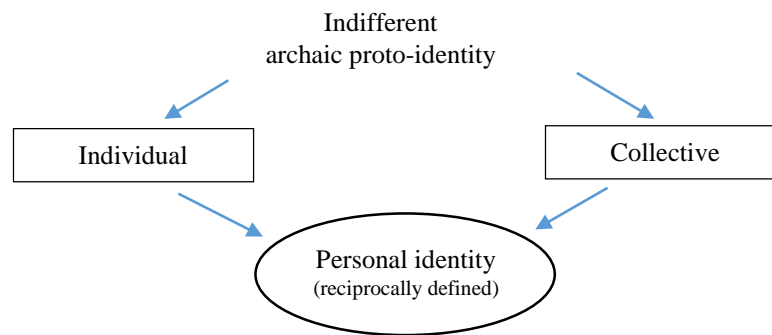
Figure 1: *Split of the indifferent archaic proto-identity*

B. Indifferent (proto-) identity as the primary state

We have to distinguish between the phenomenon of *gender domination* (matriarchy / patriarchy), the *collective ancestry based on gender* (matrilineal / patrilineal) and the so called ‚*locality*' (i.e. the residence of the family). Between the 1,231 ethnic groups studied worldwide, around 78% exhibit a combination of patriarchy and virilocality. As shown below, it is most often the woman who leaves her community of origin and moves into the strange collective of her husband. In many cases, husbands could have several women. However, within the 1,231 societies listed in the 1980 Ethnographic Atlas, only 4 societies practiced polyandry (ie women being married with several men on a regular basis).[1]

The key moment of that development is the split of the previously unified human proto-identity into two distinct forms of human identity: a collective identity and an individual identity. The identity of hordes (form of rule: natural despotism) still does not show the distinction between the individual and the collective identity. However, humans set up marriage rules from a verly early stage on. The developing marriage rules established between different collectives and the ensuing rules of residency (i.e. at what place the newly constituted family will establish their shared home) unleashed a dynamic, which so far has not been taken duly into account by the social anthropology:

Distribution according to HRAF (Murdock 1949, p. 194)

	Africa	Eurasia	N.-America	S.-America	Oceania		Sum
Bilocal	2	1	6	2	8	=	19
Neolocal	0	3	12	1	1	=	17
Matrilo-cal	3	2	16	9	8	=	39
Avuncu-local	2	0	4	0	2	=	8
Ambilo-cal	5	4	9	2	2	=	22
Patrilo-kal	53	24	23	7	39	=	156
Total	65	34	70	21	60	=	

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[1] *Ethnographic Atlas Codebook* derived from George P. Murdock's *Ethnographic Atlas* recording the marital composition of 1,231 societies from 1960 to 1980. (taken from: Murdock, George P. [1949]: "Social Structure", New York: Macmillan).

Relation between descent and postmarital residence:

	Matrilocal uxorilocal	Avunculocal	Patrilocal virilocal	Other		
Patrilineal	1	0	563	25	=	588
Matrilineal	53	62	30	19	=	164
Total	54	62	593	44		

Figure 2: *Descendence and postmarital residence*

Actually the virilocality (ie the fact the women move to their husband) dominates in about 78,5% of the known and investigated 1,231 ethnic groups.[2] For my hypothesis, the second of the two tables is the critical one because it integrates the characteristics of lineage and locality (grand total = 753, hence the proportion of the patri- or virilocal ethnic groups within the total of 593 cases amounts to about 78,5%):

For early human individuals, which still shared an indifferent proto-identity, it must have been an existential gash with an enormous psychological impact to leave their collective of origin while still in their youth. In most cases, the women had to endure the most of this rule. The combination of patriarchy and virilocality leads to woman bearing the greater burden. Not only does she lose her community of origin, but she also ends up in a double sense (and with a high degree of certainty) at the bottom of the hierarchy of the target collective because: a) she will be part of the female subgroup subordinated to the male subgroup, and b) within that female subgroup, again, she will at least start at the very bottom of the hierarchy. In addition, she will be often directly subordinate to her husband, who has a kind of immediate commanding authority over her. This stands in stark contrast to what the woman would have typically experienced until her marriage as children - including the girls - are not usually subject of such a definite gender ranking. This brusque change of nearly all social relationships alone must have a strong impact on the affected children. Of course, they are already acquainted with these phenomena by having grown up between adults accustomed to it. However, being oneself subject of such an order is a different thing.

What (hypothetically) follows can be sequenced into six consecutive steps:[3]

Step 1: Severe alienation of the newly married women during the first years after their arrival in their target collective (initially hordes, then tribes, later on families). From the moment of their marriage on, any further contact with her collective of origin is restricted or even impossible. From this follows an almost total loss of her old collective identity, being at the same time under an enormous pressure to integrate in their new target collective (beginning with the sub-hierarchy of the women of that collective).

Step 2: Usually newly married women quickly become pregnant and have one or more children. Because the primary contact of the newborn and infant to the external world is led almost anywhere in the world by their mothers, the primordial relationship of every infant is deeply shaped by the relationship of its mother to her world.

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[2] See H.-R. Wicker, paper from 2005-09-01, p. 13, online available (in German) under: http://www.an-thro.unibe.ch/unibe/philhist/anthro/content/e297/e1386/e3578/linkliste3579/leitfaden_ethnosoz_ger.pdf

[3] The following anthropological hypothesis does not see itself as being contrary to modern developmental psychology of the infant, as for example, presented by Michael Tomasello (see especially *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*. Harvard University Press, 1999. ISBN 0-674-00582-1 and *Origins of Human Communication*. MIT Press. ISBN 978-0-262-20177-3). On the contrary, I myself am a supporter of the view of Tomasello and his conforming peers. However, the anthropological part of his thesis does not affect the question of what provided the initial impetus to the development of that special human ability, which he calls "shared intentionality". My own hypothesis follows from the intuition of an *argumentum ex negativo*: It emphasizes the fact of an unequal gender treatment as the result of globally dominant marriage laws and concludes that it is rather improbable that such a stark and persistent inequality and the ensuing stress in the affected humans did not produce any effect on the long-ranging self-understanding of a respective collective.

Step 3: Since the early societies identified themselves almost exclusively by kinship, the mother who leaves her collective of origin carries the burden of re-establishing social integration. By definition, she does *not* belong to their target collective. Exactly in that delicate phase of generating her new collective identity, she has very young children, which unconsciously will internalize that conflict.[4]

Step 4: In patriarchal and patrilineal societies especially the boys do *not* usually identify with their mothers in what regards their collective identity but with their male role model and, in doing so, with their community too. However, the conflict continues. Firstly because the boy loves his mother and thus has to cope with the alienation of her, which has become a part of his self, too, and secondly because it is a systemic problem, i.e. it is repeated permanently in every generation of that community.

Step 5: The children, eventually reaching adulthood, convey that identity conflict unconsciously and as a question never to be answered into the collective. The uncertainty of the individual affiliation thus infects the whole community, resembling a collectively hidden neurosis: none of their members is neither completely integrated nor completely a stranger. The collective may respond to this tension with a kind of 'constructive defense reaction' by emphasizing the historical continuum of their own collective, i.e. by the invention of an exclusive narrative of descent, a virtual genealogy. Although none of the members can actually conform with the strict rules of descent, the common narrative makes them part of the genealogy. In all known ethnic groups, these narratives are extremely important, because ultimately their social cohesion depends on them. These narratives materialize continually by the invention and practice of rites, whereby the community assures itself, down to the most direct corporeality of its members, the "absolute" truth of their collective identity.

Step 6: Differentiation into a shared imperative regarding the behavioral duties of all of the collective's individual members on the one hand and their deviating personal desires on the other. Whereas the collective structure of the common will and authority was perfectly natural in the primate hordes, it manifests itself at this stage in a desire for maintenance and reassertion of collective identity. This is expressed by a) shared traditions and habits and b) the urge to establish general norms that shall and will be internalized by its members as their own will. To the extent as this is successful, the member is able to gain influence both on the concrete and practical enforcement of standards as well as the implementation of sanctions for their violation. This favors the development of symbolic behavioral orders, because it presents the prospect of a synthesis of the otherwise disintegrated individual and collective desires and duties.

Now, let us proceed to the second part of the story, i.e. to the evolution of the collective identity through the well-known occidental history.

C. The consequences of the Greek principle of rational reflection and of the Christian world view

In ancient Greece, personal identity started to become cognitively independent from any collective membership. This is reflected in the paradigmatic question style of Socrates, as his fundamental questions are posed with complete disregard of the collective identity of his dialogue partner. In the same sense, the famous "Know thyself!"(γνῶθι σεαυτόν) engraved in the cornice of the Delphi temple is today consistently understood as the explicit assertion of the primacy of the individual in its efforts to find its own way of life and develop a responsibility towards the collective(s) she/he belongs to. There is no coercion anymore that collective affiliations have to be solely ethnically defined or ancestry-based. Instead, they can now emanate out of various shared interests.

The rise of the monotheistic religions, especially those of Christianity, brings along another detachment of the old identity of origin. This causes a fundamental "pole reversal" of the ultimate responsibility of the individual. While this pole in the pre- and non-monotheistic religions was always

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[4] A well-known case of preverbal passing of traumatic experiences from the mother to their little children has been studied extensively for the children of female inmates of Nazi concentration camps, see e.g.: http://www.journal-fuer-psychologie.de/index.php/jfp/article/view/268/310 (text in German, with several further bibliographical references.)

oriented towards the past – and that means towards the human or divine ancestors – the One God of the monotheistic religions becomes the ultimate, time-transcending (eventually time-neutral) reference of both the personal and collective identity. The earliest monotheistic religion, i.e. Jewry, still exhibits this conversion of the pole explicitly, insofar as Yahweh originally was thought to be the corporeal progenitor of the Israelite and Jewish tribes. By contrast, the denomination of the Christian God as "Father" has to be understood only in the sense of "with the direct authority of a father". Accordingly, the biological paternity of Joseph has been almost completely pushed into the background, much more than the further on strongly maintained biological motherhood of Maria. That, of course, had to happen when the authority of the One God of a patriarchal culture, imagined to be a male, had to be enforced against an older collective identity based on male descent and its ensuing responsibility structure.

Being itself a patriarchal doctrine, Christianity spread almost exclusively in patriarchal societies. The erosion of secular, ancestry-based authority in favor of abstract divine authority had an enormous effect on the identity of origin within the affected cultures. It blew up the formerly iron clamp of social norms based on the imagined authority of the ancestors.

D. The rationalism of the early modern period: Turning away from the past

With the end of the Middle Ages a broad reflection on the social reality begins, which produces a first political climax in the writings of Thomas Hobbes (1588 - 1679). This was probably co-triggered by the disappointment of the European public that sees the omnipotence of "their" God questioned when confronted with a devastating plague and constant wars. From now on, political authority is increasingly defined as the outcome of a collective, conscious act of will. Consequently, the legitimacy of the moral authority emerges out of a social order turning utilitarian, i.e. benefit-oriented. The common good now defines by what is good for the whole of the constitutive people. It is no longer good for simply because you owe it to your ancestors, but because it is *currently* useful for you and all around you. Thus, the rationalism of the early modern period creates a now-centered identity, as it appears, sometimes in all of its inherent rough stuff, in the political writings of Machiavelli.

This view was elaborated and perfected in the absolutist theory of the state of Samuel Pufendorf (1632 – 1694).[5] Pufendorf emphasizes the equality of all humans, of course still in a Christian tradition. However, it was the common good that turned to being at the core of the fundamental structure of the state. Ultimately, this led to a *rational* ultimate grounding of all moral responsibility postulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, and most prominently by Kant.

E. Modern times: The U-Turn towards the future

Both of these very effective germs of the development of personal identity, i.e. the ancient rationalism and the transcendent authority of the very personal Christian God start flourishing powerfully, eventually leading to a kind of global triumph in the course of the Enlightenment and the subsequent Industrial Revolution. This development was further promoted by the doctrine of direct responsibility of the Christian protestants towards their God. In the west, the idea of God becomes gradually outstripped and will be ultimately shed; Friedrich Nietzsche is its grandiose gravedigger. Instead, it is the idea of *progress* (together with the morally more neutral Darwinism) as a universally applicable axiom

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[5] See: Pufendorf, Samuel: *De iure naturae et gentium libri octo* (first Latin edition: Lund 1672). Pufendorf herein specifically addresses the Hobbesian social contract doctrine. But he already labels the *bonum comune*, i.e. the common good, as the only policy objective. He also grants the constitutive people the right to choose their own form of government as a logical consequence of a voluntary (contractual) political act, and he mentions, along with aristocracy and monarchy, democracy as one of the possible outcomes of such a choice. The essence of this today most popular form of government is fully focused on the present age. All citizens should *now* participate in shaping their society. In democratic theory, a general development program is at most formulated in terms of the perfection of the social institutions. Beyond this "general repair program" (as explicitly re-stated 200 year later by Sir Charles Popper in his "The Open Society and Its Enemies", 1945) it has in itself no program at all.

and consequently as a behavioral imperative to improve the world, that increasingly dominates the collective and the individual identity. Detached from the Christian commitment to perfection God's creation on earth, the idea of a permanent improvement of the world picks up speed and spreads across peoples. This sets in motion a dynamic that cannot be described differently as an *unleashing*, insofar as there is no defined end state anymore in sight for a world thus sentenced to improve forever. The most important incentive and new myth of our time is that those who contribute most to this improvement will also be rewarded the most, in monetary terms well understood.

Together with the social consequences of this ever-expanding doctrine to maximize economic benefits, the Western societies unite under a single new form of collective identity that I call *program identity*. Cultures based on program identity are characterized in that they allow materially different collective identities in all kinds of sub-collectives. Each of these partial collectives establishes its own goals. Formally, it is the programmatic association of individuals under a common purpose, be this a business corporation, a political party or whatever. Such associations are a very efficient vehicle to pool the strengths of many individuals in favor of the shared aims by redirecting as much as possible of their motivational and moral forces. This development completes the 180° turn of the archaic culture of origin, which is fully backward-looking as based on common ancestors, towards a future-oriented, action based (collective and individual) identity shaped by the common aims of the passionately proclaimed development program in every of the sub-collectives.
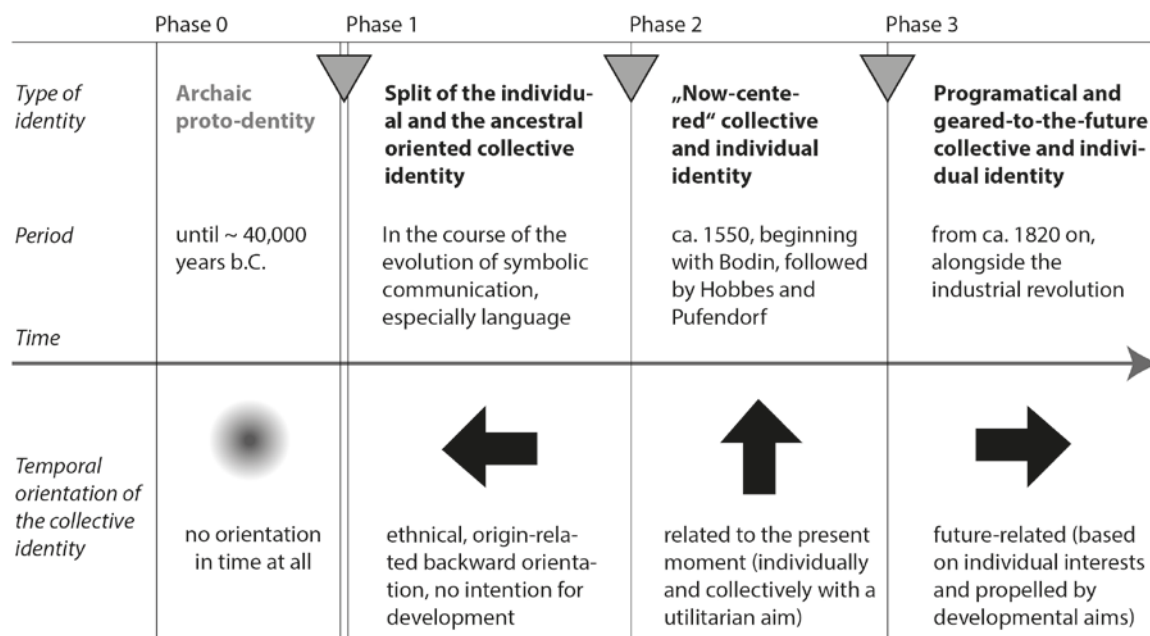
	Phase 0	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Type of identity	Archaic proto-dentity	**Split of the individual and the ancestral oriented collective identity**	**„Now-centered" collective and individual identity**	**Programatical and geared-to-the-future collective and individual identity**
Period	until ~ 40,000 years b.C.	In the course of the evolution of symbolic communication, especially language	ca. 1550, beginning with Bodin, followed by Hobbes and Pufendorf	from ca. 1820 on, alongside the industrial revolution
Time				
Temporal orientation of the collective identity	no orientation in time at all	ethnical, origin-related backward orientation, no intention for development	related to the present moment (individually and collectively with a utilitarian aim)	future-related (based on individual interests and propelled by developmental aims)

Figure 3: *The evolution of the human individual and collective identity*

The modern multi-national corporation (valued at the stock exchange almost exclusively by its potential for future profits) as well as the newly founded start-up, the green movement as well as those groups of gadget lovers desperately waiting for the release of a new electronic toy: They all live form the conjured coming into existence of their agreed aims and goals. The biggest part of the social forces are generated from the will to achieve common *objectives*. No significant motivation can be won anymore from the history and origin of a collective.

So far, the individual is much freer than before, as it can decide on its membership on rational considerations, both in terms of joining a collective as well as its termination. As soon as a members experiences an "apostasy" from the programmatic goals of its respective collective (we usually belong to several such collectives at one time), this constitutes an absolute reason to leave it. Normally such a resignation will not only be accepted by the peers but even cheered, because if one does not believe anymore in the specific collective program, she or he quickly becomes a motivational burden for the remaining members.

Modern counter-movements to this tendency, e.g. the rise of museums exhibiting shared historic consciousness by pieces of art or other meaningful things and other institutions maintaining a social identity by no means override this dynamic. They even support it: Since at times the described programmatic identity with all its goals to realize can be quite exhausting, we seek relaxation by looking back, thus reassuring ourselves that we're still on the right track – anytime ready to jump up and march on. This effort is the contrary of the "reverse" strain of our ancestors to placate their mighty spirits by permanent rites. For me it is not clear who is better off in this asynchronous game. Anyway, we have no choice.

Program identity does not mean that goals are not achievable because the imperative to improve the world has no defined end. To the contrary, it means that final goals may *not* be achieved in any case because otherwise our today's conception of social life loses its meaning. This is one of the more drastic consequences: that our collective identity does not arise anymore from the past and not even from the present as still some 500 years ago, but truly from our imagined future.

F. Summary

a) Collective and individual identity are the result of the differentiation of a prior (and indifferent) unity of the individual with his collective community. They define mutually out of the resulting discrepancy. The anthropological origin of this development lies in the patriarchic marriage and family residence rules of earlier collectives, which was mainly at the expense of women. Members of early collectives were thus splintered which led to the emergence of not only the old collective identity based on male focused descent narratives, but but also to a strong impulse to develop social institutions.

b) Within the European cultural development, the old collective identity experienced a reversal of its orientation in time. While collectives of the early modern period discovered and favored an individual and collective identity based on the Now, they have turned towards the future since the industrial revolution. This generated a development driven "program identity" based on shared and mostly material interests.