



HAL
open science

Rigidity of the Generalized Other, unilaterality of the Otherness and demodernization, in the framework of symbolic interactionism

Giuseppe Iurato

► **To cite this version:**

Giuseppe Iurato. Rigidity of the Generalized Other, unilaterality of the Otherness and demodernization, in the framework of symbolic interactionism. 2015. hal-01167165v1

HAL Id: hal-01167165

<https://hal.science/hal-01167165v1>

Preprint submitted on 23 Jun 2015 (v1), last revised 25 Aug 2018 (v5)

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Rigidity of the *Generalized Other*, unilaterality of the *Otherness* and *demodernization*, in the framework of symbolic interactionism

Giuseppe Iurato

University of Palermo, IT

E-mail: giuseppe.iurato@unipa.it

*Call for papers for an interdisciplinary conference
“Demodernization: Perspectives and Approaches”
February 29 - March 1, 2016, Nice, France.*

Theories of modernization used to provide models for a progressive transition from the “traditional” to the “modern”. This transition entailed, inter alia, forging a national identity as opposed to tribal or religious ones, increasing life expectancy, reducing socio-economic disparities, developing science and technology and even increasing the possibilities for self-realization.

Modernization was deemed irreversible. However, reverse processes can today be found all around us. This phenomenon – “demodernization” – manifests itself in lasting degradation of material, health, and cultural conditions in formerly modernized societies as well as in a return to ostensibly traditional ways of life and identities. Demodernization means regression according to commonly accepted criteria spelled out in various theories of modernization.

Modernization can be turned back under both internal and external pressures. It used to be proclaimed as a universal right. It has now become a privilege reserved for some countries while others, deemed “rogue” or otherwise recalcitrant, may be denied this right. Demodernization may be used to explain changes in many more societies than those, e.g. former Soviet republics, Libya or Iraq, where it manifested itself most graphically. This concept may facilitate a better understanding of the contemporary world, which is experiencing not only declining economic growth and rising inequality. It also faces the emergence of new kinds of conflict such as the so-called Islamic State, which may be said to epitomize political demodernization with its references to divinely ordained rights.

Modernization and demodernization need not be mutually exclusive; both may take place simultaneously, stimulate each other, produce various hybrid forms or end up in an uneasy coexistence within the same country. Merciless exploitation typical of industrialization in the West and the role of Gulag in Stalinist modernization are instances of these hybrid forms. Who and what are the main protagonists of demodernization? Does this phenomenon observed in widely different contexts, have certain common traits? What are the motive forces and propitious conditions of demodernization? What are its protagonists in the public and private sectors? Finally, how can the concept of demodernization be used as an analytic and an epistemological tool? Or is it primarily a descriptive tool lending support to other paradigms? Scholars in different disciplines of humanities and social sciences are invited to submit proposals for papers and panels (maximum 300 words) in English or French, by June 1, 2015. Final papers of up to 10,000 words are due by December 1, 2015. It is expected that papers presented at this conference will be published as a collective volume.

The organizing committee:

Professor Vadim Menzhulin, Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Kiev

Dr. Detlev Quintern, Institute for Postcolonial and Transcultural Studies, University of Bremen

Professor Pierre-Yves Quiviger, Université de Nice-Sophia Antipolis

Professor Yakov Rabkin, Université de Montréal (Chairman)

Dr. Hiroshi Suzuki, Institute of Developing Economies, Tokyo

Professor Hakam Yilmaz, Bosphorus University, Istanbul

Mr. Nari Shelekpayev (executive secretary)

What follows, is an enlarged version of my proposal for trying to partially answer to the above underscored questions claimed by conference aims, a restricted version having been submitted to the organizing committee just to this end.

Proposal

From a sociological viewpoint, if *modernization* and *demodernization* phenomena wish to be seen as components of a pair whose elements are one the inverse of the other, then it is need to consider a minimal but rigorous theoretical construct which includes and explains them as such. For instance, the psycho-sociological construct of *Generalized Other*, as originally formulated by George Herbert Mead within *symbolic interactionism* context, might be able to accomplish this end. Indeed, taking into account the primary psychosocial foundations of the *Self* of a human being living in a given community, as historically meant by W. James, C.H. Cooley and Mead, the configuration of her or his consciousness (of own *Self*) may be thought as the result of the cooperative action of either the capability of producing and responding to the various symbols and the competence of undertaking the behaviours of others. The human mental functions start to run only when an individual is able to symbolically appoint the objects of her or his environment. From this moment onwards, the *Self* is one of these objects, and its minimal required components are the *name* and the personal pronouns and their use, i.e., I, me, my, and so forth. With these basic linguistic terms, it will be possible to distinguish and identify the *Self* as one of the many objects of own world. The more the language enriches, the world of objects richer and enlarger, so comprising objects of everyday life, physical things and phenomena, relationships, and so on. Every object undergoes valuations, comparisons, expectations. This also concerns the *Self* that, in such a manner, it is the result of the various behaviours, evaluations, comparisons, expectations of the others. These latter, who surround the child within a given social community where the main communication mean is the language, adopt certain behaviours in her or his regard, and just these behaviours are the basis for the inferences that the child performs with respect to the particular type of object who he or she is. In this fashion, the child shall become more or less differentiated with respect to the others and herself or himself. The capability to develop further the *Self* depends both on the intrinsic meaning and organization of the family, of the social groups and of the community, all together considered. By means of either a *simple* and an *organized* play (as meant by Mead), the child respectively will learn and regulate the development of her or his own *Self*, introducing in herself or himself the organization made by the other personalities (so giving rise to the *Significant Others*), and will acquire and internalize in herself or himself the set of the attitudes and behaviours of all the others (so giving rise to the *Generalized Other*).

To be precise, the configuration of consciousness may be thought as due to the *internalization* (so providing the Meadian *Me*) of: *i*) the behaviours that living community, or its sectors, have manifested with respect to either her or him, and other subjects belonging or not to this community (*Generalized Other*); *ii*) the various norms and rules prescribed by the living community that human being has learned to generalize by means of the developing of different roles as well as interpreting the roles of other persons under the influence of a certain historical series of *Significant Others*. The latter include every individual, or group of individuals, who, inserted into a certain net of social relations, plays, or has played in the past, a role of special and remarkable importance for a given human being until up to be able to modifying or shaping her or his behaviour or the social action in certain situations. The *Generalized Other* is meant, by Mead, as the whole community or all the organized social groups, that provide the *Self*'s unity to each individual member; the attitude of the *Generalized Other* is nothing but the attitude of the whole community. Undertaking the attitude of

the Generalized Other together its related symbolism, the individual becomes an organic and aware member of the society. Thanks to Generalized Other, the social process influences the behaviour of the individuals involved in it, who, in turn, partially contributes to develop such a process. Thus, the Self is mainly a process which arises from the past (i.e., cultural memory) and builds up with the interactions of the individual with other individuals belonging to her or his community, mirroring ideas, judgements, cultural models and ethics that social community provides her or him. The Self cannot yet manifest itself without the presence of some other, that is to say, its existence relies on the Alterity (see later), precisely on the reference frames provided by the society which is always symbolically present in the mind of every individual of it. To be aware of herself or himself, an individual must interiorize the attitudes and behaviours of others to control the action who he or she is undertaking. Nevertheless, the (creative) *I* has either the individual function to subjectively face and reply to the *various*¹ social-cultural agencies, roles, manners and instances internalized through the (conformist) *Me*, trying possibly to modify them, and imprinting a personal character to every member of a social group who has internalized its behaviours and attitudes. The communication amongst the members of a given social group, takes place thanks to the *language* which employs commonly shared symbols understood just thanks to a mediated capacity to use symbols that Mead calls *Mind*.

Notwithstanding that, there may exist different social groups to which a given individual belongs, which might provide contradictory or antagonist attitudes or behaviours, within Generalized Other, along the route of formation of the Self. Mead has provided a very few answers to this last question, to whose lack might perhaps supply psychoanalysis. Indeed, certain psychoanalytic concepts, like the *identification* which concerns the first affective adhesion or attachment of the child to the others, while, for the adult, is the attitude or the behaviour which leads to either the *introjection* (that is to say, introducing the other inside Self) and the *projection* (that is to say, introducing Self into the other) enable to better understand and explaining how an individual conforms to certain cultural models, customs and traditions. Likewise, the psychoanalysis, by means of the action of certain defence mechanisms, may concur to explain in which fashions and ways *institutional constraints*, besides to contain drives, produce heterogeneities and make individual differences which go beyond conformism. Mead reconnects institutions to his concept of *Me*: an *institution*, according to Mead, is the collective organization of a certain set of attitudes and behaviours commonly shared and symbolically recognized by each member through the *Mind*, hence internalized by means of the *Me* agency which will determine, regulate and control (often unconsciously) the consequent social action and conduct; then, the *I*, in its relationships with the *Me*, will provide the awareness agencies. The influence of culture in human personality, from the psychoanalytic standpoint, has been above all studied by neo-Freudians, amongst whom are E. Fromm, V. Kardiner and R. Linton, for instance with the introduction and use of the central notion of *basic personality* and its multimodalities. Furthermore, many relationships amongst the theoretical construct of Generalized Other and the notion of Freudian Super-Ego exist, and, in this regard, particularly interesting is, for instance, T. Parsons interpretation and use of Freudian psychoanalysis in theoretical sociology. Along this line of thought, on the other hand, there exist too further strict relationships amongst Generalized Other and Freudian Super-Ego, even to reach the ideological notion of national identity. For instance, due to the chiefly unconscious nature of the Meadian *Me*, a possible link between Freudian Super-Ego

¹ This point will be retaken when, for example, we shall discuss on the rigidity of the Generalized Other.

and Generalized Other may be, for instance, identified just through the Meadian Me in which, as we have just seen above, relies the notion of social institution, so being able to justify its unconscious features as, for instance, claimed by C. Lévi-Strauss, who had already spoken and treated of an unconscious structure of social institutions.

On the other hand, many of the above concepts, in first place those concerning the other, may be usefully related with the wider and complex notion of *Alterity* which refers to what is *other* from that is given as one, as identical, as subject, and as person. Thus, Alterity is a basic notion closely related to these latter and inseparable from them: with respect to what is given as one, it is indicative of multiplicity (*ontological alterity*); with respect to the identical, it is the opposite (*logical alterity*); with respect to the subject, it is the object (*epistemological alterity*); and, with respect to the person, it is the other, or the Other (*existential or transcendental alterity*). That of Alterity gives rise, therefore, to a founding problem of philosophy because such a term entails the difficult task of establishing all the possible relationships between the main constitutive terms of the Being, so that such a really crucial problem dialectically also refers to the total unity of these last basic constitutive elements of the Alterity, as well as to an integration of their various meanings. We are particularly interested in that Alterity's term which refers to the person, namely the *existential alterity*, in which the notion of *Self* is placeable, but, in general, the complex Meadian dynamics between the constitutive elements *I* and *Me* within *Self*, reflects and comprises almost all the above aspects of Alterity: for instance, the dialectic relation between *I*, which is the subjective part of the Self, and *Me*, which is the objective part of the Self, reflects epistemological alterity, while the attendance of the Generalized Other with respect to the Self reflects the other aspects of Alterity which, as seen above, may have a pluralistic sense due to its meaning variegation. What we wish to point out in this proposal, is a possible correlation between Alterity and its variegation, as institutionally actuated, collectively recognized and equally guaranteed, and the modernization-demodernization phenomena.

On the other hand, the range of all the Significant Others enables the rising and development of the more or less pluralistic sense of the *Otherness* (or *Alterity*) – as seen above – in dependence on its amplitude, heterogeneity, flexibility and variety of composing elements considered together with their interrelations. This set of Significant Others, say \mathcal{S}_O , may give rise therefore a formal structure whose composition and dimensions might be formally characterized also in terms of dynamical system theory, for example following Lévi-Strauss' use of thermodynamic notions in working out his theory of *cold* and *hot societies*, and the related theory of progress. In any case, this formal internal parametric characterization of Otherness (or Alterity) \mathcal{O} through the series of Significant Others, on its turn, may imply a further, possible formal characterization of the Generalized Other, say \mathcal{G}_O , inasmuch as it contains the former, that is $\mathcal{S}_O \subseteq \mathcal{G}_O (\subseteq \mathcal{O})$. So, we are disposed to think that modernization-demodernization phenomena may be influenced by this formal parametrization of the Generalized Other \mathcal{G}_O through the series of Significant Others \mathcal{S}_O . In this regard, we are also inclined to think that a *paucity* of the series of Significant Others \mathcal{S}_O , as well as a *rigidity* of the Generalized Other \mathcal{G}_O , that is, a certain *unilaterality* of the sense of Alterity (Otherness) \mathcal{O} , are at the early and deep structural bases of demodernization processes because, for example, such features may shrink the variety of dualistic and dialectic relationships between *I* and *Me*, with a consequent flattening towards the latter, while a narrowness of the Otherness would surely entail a scant

assortment of the Generalized Other, hence a shortness of the series of Significant Others, as, for example, surely enabled by an institutional lack. Therefore, the deficiency of collective institutions would imply a narrowed sense of Alterity (or Otherness), then a rigidity of the Generalized Other, hence a poorness of the series of Significant Others, whence demodernization pushes.

Often, restraints or limitations to modernization and progress rely on unconscious places, upon which, as we have recalled above, lean institutions themselves. On the other hand, unconscious phenomena may be also contemplated within this our framework through the unconscious features of the Generalized Other (belonging to the Meadian Me). In this respect, as a first example, we would like to look at that particular sociological phenomenon of persistence, in the cultural memory (in the sense of J. Assmann) of *local unconscious vestiges*² regarding institution and norms, like the case study provided by a South Italy not finite architecture custom consisting in keeping unfinished some last upper parts of many buildings without any current reasonable motivation, if not the ones retraceable in a minor clause contained in an ancient norm of Bourbon tax system which exempted the building owner to pay fee just in case of uncompleted construction of an edifice. In such a case, which is today anachronistic and meaningless³, the actual lacking of a specific and apposite current norm regulating this last situation (hence, a deficiency in the Generalized Other, or a shortage of its flexibility to give suitable and efficient responses), has yet entailed the unconscious persistence of vestiges of ancient local norms, with a consequent decline in architectural style and sight aesthetics (i.e., a kind of urban demodernization). Likewise, as a second example of this type of sociological phenomenon of demodernization which lay upon unconscious aspects, we now quote that strange lacking of future tense in Sicilian speech (or dialect) which surely may be brought back to the frustration and pessimistic distrust that still characterize Sicilian temperament, which often seem even remember the ancient "lamentations" and environment of Greek tragedies, likely due to the numerous, long and persistent foreign dominations which have interested a lot of time Sicily land and Sicilian people, along its millenary historical course. Also in this latter case, a rigidity of the Otherness (that mainly has a non-negligible unconscious extent), explicated in linguistic terms as a demodernization linguistic phenomenon due to certain space-time failures or a gaps in the historical realization of the language in the Sicilian speech⁴ to which, not by chance, corresponds an as much

² Also Freud, as early before Jung, in many points of his work, considered aspects of a collective or transpersonal unconscious, for instance when he spoke of *archaic vestiges* in the Super-Ego (hence, in the Otherness as modeled by Meadian Me along the line that links together Super-Ego and Me notions), as well as acts of consciousness which are influenced by archaic motifs, conscious traditions which may be unconscious in certain individuals. In this last Freudian sense, we may understand such local unconscious vestiges.

³ The interesting process of becoming personal character traits of individual and collective customs and practices has been studied, within juridical anthropology, by L. Assier-Andrieu.

⁴ Loosely speaking, we may consider a *speech* as an historical realization of a *language* which takes place in a given space-time range within a given social group or community in which certain signs, values and symbols, systemically organized, historically may determine such a speech. The varieties of speeches is then provided by the various historical determinations of the language. In this specific case study, we have the persistence of archaic unconscious material (by Freud called *archaic vestiges*, as recalled by Jung) produced by repression in certain meaningful and incisive space-time events which have afterwards contributed, by re-emersion, to the formation and maintenance of specific and aspecific temporal modalities of verbal conjugations of the Sicilian speech to which inherent social-cultural institutions have yet precluded, for some reasons, any form of change. In this our case study, the emergence of archaic unconscious vestiges (likely dating back to the previous foreign dominations against which wanted to impose the ever negated will of a never recognized Sicilian identity) is, for example, explainable by means of the primary psychoanalytic relationships between Freudian *thing* (unconscious) *representation* and *word* (conscious) *representation*, precisely in the close and inseparable link between *thing representation-word representation* charactering the spoken (conscious) language: i.e., the implicit archaic unconscious vestiges in thing representation, due to the repression of strongly unpleasant remembrances of past

intricate, bogged down and extremely bureaucratic institutional system whose structure seems still keep privileges and harassments of previous foreign dominators (see, for instance, the emblematic situation of the even more oppressing and often indiscriminate Italian fiscal system in regard to the efficiency and services provided to citizens, and that, basically, in its main intentionality, has little changed with respect to those of the previous foreign dominators⁵) now unconsciously taken by the current Italian ruling institutional classes from time to time on duty. This, therefore, is another emblematic sociological case study of the persistence of local unconscious vestiges in institutions which still persist and hand down in the cultural memory of a society, influencing its structure and development, hence, through the Otherness, so contributing to affect the formations of the social character of every member. This discussion is carried out according to that trend of sociology which confides in the strong influence exerted by social factors, structures and relations in the constitution and development of human personality, just by means of cultural memory operating through the institutional actuation and recognition of the Otherness (or Alterity), meant according to (Meadian) symbolic interactionism. On the other hand, this sociological trend cannot be fully neglected because otherwise, from an anthropological standpoint, those observed cultural diversities among various peoples and societies might not be explained except to refer to genetic differences and racist motivations which does not any scientific basis.

In conclusion, we think that above all the amplitude of the Meadian Generalized Other construct of symbolic interactionism, together with its various psychoanalytic features, may be usefully employed to try to formally explain modernization-demodernization phenomena.

foreign domination events, is strictly linked to the word representation explicated as a pessimistic lacking of future tense in verbal conjugations of Sicilian speech.

⁵ This pernicious behaviour and custom of Italian political institutions against modernization, and even more stressed in South Italy, might be clearly metaphorized by the celebrated quotation of Tancredi Falconeri in *The Leopard* (1958) of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, according to whom «If we want that things stay as they are, it is need that all have to change», to mean that if the higher social classes want to hold power and leadership, then it is need to surreptitiously change things in respect to the eyes of lowest and bourgeois classes that claim power and an higher social level. This last institutional custom has been just named *leopardism*, as, for instance, recently recalled too by Tobias Jones.

References

- L. Assier-Andrieu, "Il tempo e il diritto dell'identità collettiva. Il destino antropologico del concetto di consuetudine", *Sociologia del Diritto*, XXVI (3) (1999) pp. 15-50.
- S. Camilleri, *Grammatica Siciliana*, Angelo Boemi Editore, Catania, 2002.
- S. Correnti, *Storia di Sicilia come storia del popolo siciliano*, Seconda edizione, Longanesi & C., Milano, 1992.
- W. Doise, J. Deschamps, G. Mugny, *Psicologia sociale*, Nicola Zanichelli editore, Bologna, 1980.
- L. Gallino, *Dizionario di Sociologia*, Seconda edizione riveduta e aggiornata, UTET Libreria, Torino, 2006.
- T. Jones, *The Dark Heart of Italy*, Revised Edition, North Point Press, New York, 2003.
- C.G. Jung, "Civiltà in transizione. Il periodo fra le due guerre", in *Opere*, Vol. 10/2, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 1992.
- F.L. Mueller, *Storia della psicologia*, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milano, 1978.
- A. Palmonari, *Processi simbolici e dinamiche sociali*, Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna, 1989.
- L. Sciascia, *La corda pazza. Scrittori e cose della Sicilia*, Adelphi Edizioni, Milano, 1991.
- L. Sciascia, *Pirandello e la Sicilia*, Adelphi Edizioni, Milano, 1996.