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**Work and Narrative Identity:
Social Anomie in Contemporary Europe**

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Abstract

Since the end of the 1970s, an incremental erosion of social rights, resulting from successive restructurings of national labour markets that have been encouraged at European Union level, and the consequent emergence of a society of competition, has led to social anomie while at the same time opening the way for a new disciplinary normative order. That new order is shaping or reshaping individual and collective identity by caging people into patterns of relations that promote fear, indifference, intolerance towards others, or feelings of shame and a loss of self esteem. In the most extreme cases, this leads to self-annihilation.

Key Words: Identity, social norms, competition, docility, shame, self-esteem, self-annihilation, work, unemployment, Europe.

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Introduction

In past decades, the European “social model” has changed dramatically. Ideal-typically, the change of paradigm can be characterized as the passage from a regime of social relations that allowed the promotion of economic development under conditions of relative social fairness, to a regime that is centred on generalized competition. In the first, social fairness became a foundational component of post-war West European collective identity. In the second, competition is seen as the only legitimate horizon of society. Individual and collective claims for social justice are negated when they seem to threaten the logic of competition. In the labour market, flexibility and « mobility » have become the norm, supplanting stable employment conditions, « decent » wages and reasonable perspectives of social and professional promotion. As we shall see below, this norm was incrementally imposed from on top thanks to a determined and voluntary reconfiguration of public policies. It has led to a return, under new conditions, to patterns of social relations of the early twentieth century: deep income and wealth inequalities; a new proletariat in an ever-expanding service sector that relies on a rarely unionized low wage flexible labour force; a reserve army of unemployed and/or undocumented workers, the mass of which come from vulnerable, hence feebly autonomous social groups — migrants, women, ethnic minorities, etc.

Promoted by economic and political rhetoric as signifiers of modernism, the words “mobility” and “flexibility” were mobilized to critique and undermine the set of meanings attached to the post-1945 social systems such as solidarity, which were systematically denigrated for being supposedly immobile, archaic and conservative. A new set of meanings became dominant, which glorified nomad (low paid) work and insecure work conditions. In the name of competitiveness, workers or unemployed who resisted the change were/are shamed for supposedly preferring assistance to autonomy, and for living parasitically off of public “generosity”. In the new order of things, flexibility and mobility are said to bring freedom and self-fulfilment. Yet, this is only true if they contain the promise of social promotion and lead to the accomplishment of individual life projects. But rather than generating greater freedoms, flexible work today is characterized by aimlessness, chaotic life patterns and growing uncertainty for individuals struggling to find their “place” in society. A ferocious *lutte des places* (Gaulejac, Taboada Leonetti, 1994), a struggle for positions, has become the norm.

How do people react to these social conditions? What happens to their life narrative – the unity of life - when they are confronted to long or repetitive experiences of unemployment, work place mistreatment and social disdain? How can they reconstitute identity, which has been wounded, and affirm their self-worth and self-esteem? Work is an essential component of constructed individual identity but, as I have observed during years of fieldwork with the unemployed as well as workers in the mass service sector, it no longer offers the possibility of *positive* identity formation for ever-larger parts of the European population. Using Albert O. Hirschmann’s (1970) useful typology that identifies three types of social choices (*exit*, *voice* and *loyalty*), people confronted to the new constraints and injustices of the labour market have restricted choices. Since *voice* – in our case attempts to repair injustices through complaint, grievances or proposals for change – leads to sanctions or, at best, is ignored, they are left with two possibilities: *exit* (withdrawal from an unpleasant job or from the highly controlled relief-giving systems) or *loyalty* (compliance with the new normative order). Exit

and loyalty however do not allow for positive identity reconstitution. Exit often leads to *internal exile*, whereas compliance reflects submission to the dominant economic and social order, rather than identification with its norms. One of the hypotheses that I defend in this paper is that the atrophy of social life favours an atrophy of individual and collective identities, leading to withdrawal to unidimensionality.

Five theoretical remarks on the processes of identity formation

Before discussing the way in which the reconfiguration of work in recent decades is generating wounded identities, a few theoretical remarks¹ on the process of individual and collective identity formation are required.

First, identity is pluridimensional and is constructed around multiple belongings. As Judith Shklar (1989) emphasizes when distinguishing the notions of loyalty, political obligation, engagement, and faithfulness or allegiance, belongings are conflict-ridden, sometimes reinforcing each other, sometimes negating each other. But they are never entirely or definitively exclusive. That is why the temptation of some social groups or individuals to find refuge in enclaves, or what the anthropologist Georges Devereux (1972) calls identities “of class” (not to be confused with class identity) — that is to say identification with kin, age group, clan, village, religion or a nation — carries the danger of the annihilation of individual identity. He rightly notes: “If one is nothing but a Spartan, a capitalist, a proletarian, a Buddhist, one is very near to being nothing at all, and therefore to not being.” (*ibid.*, quoted by Augé, 1994: 121).

Second, identity has relatively stable features due to its rootedness in the body, the character and culture. However, because it deploys itself in life and in history, identity is also mobile, being exposed to change and questioning, to what Paul Ricœur (1990) calls “the event”. The event is a transitional moment of instability that provokes a tension and a rupture. To deal with these moments of fracture, in which the continuity of identity is challenged, people reconstitute the unity of self essentially through narrative. Narrative identity contributes decisively to self-reconstitution by restoring the meaning of a life, by retroactively transforming the event into an intrigue, chance into destiny, and contingency into the necessity of a life story (Ricœur, 1990). Identity is thus always in large part imagined.

Third, the importance of the imagination in the (re)constitution of identity signifies that individuals interpret their lives and “social reality in a mode that is not only one of participation without distance, but precisely in a mode of non-congruence” (Ricœur, 1975), of distortion with regard to reality. However, no society or culture can accept the definition of individuality and the determination of identity on an entirely arbitrary basis. Interpretive scenarios have to be compatible with the possible and the probable, the universe of meanings in which they inscribe themselves, in a word, with the constraints set by the social norms of specific collectives at any given time. Like identity, social norms are inscribed in history. They are not independent of social practices and social conflict (power relations) and are therefore always subject to interpretive conflicts. This puts into focus the importance of context in identity formation (positive or pathological). When dominant principles change, the subject’s ability to intellectually master the world through a set of stable understandings about humanity and nature, and the links between them, is upset. This has been happening as far as work is concerned in recent decades. The partial but essential putting into question of the norms, values and institutions in which subjects recognized themselves provokes a search for meaning and stimulates the narrative imagination. It is then that opposed interpretive models enter into collision and make the claim for singular authenticity and legitimacy. In such

¹ A more detailed analysis can be found in Burgi (1997, 1999).

circumstances, the “truth” of individual and collective identities does not exist in and of itself; *in fine*, it is determined by the dominant *doxa* of the age.

Fourth, individual identity cannot be understood outside of the relation of the self to the other. Identity presupposes reciprocal recognition; it is, as Lévinas insists, the identity of a subject structured like *an Other in the Same*, or an *othered* subject. The hypothetical entirely autonomous, authentic and sincere individual, freed from the other, does not exist. Therefore individual identity is inherently social (or, if you prefer, cultural), and this brings us back to the importance of context, power relations and interpretive conflicts.

Fifth, the function of work in identity formation is a complex issue since work simultaneously involves domination and self-affirmation, alienation and self-fulfilment, the balance of which is dependent on varying modes of social organisation in different historic contexts. The role of work in identity formation is therefore ambivalent, since it can lead to either pathological or integrative outcomes. Nonetheless, as an extensive psychological and sociological literature has showed, work is an essential, indeed determining component of an individual’s sense of worth and self-esteem (Clot, 1999; Dejourn, 1995; Linhart, 2002, 2009; Lhuillier, 2002, 2008; Molinier, 2006). By widening the scope of social interactions and taking the individual out of enclosed private spheres, it expands experience and creates possibilities (Clot, 2002). Work, on condition that it allows people to master their existence and live a dignified life, can favour the construction of a multidimensional identity. The indispensable components of this are: decent work,² legally recognized means of individual and collective defence of workers’ rights, collective rules of bargaining, and institutionalized social protections (health, retirement, unemployment benefits).

To the extent that the post-1945 European “social state” provided some or all of the above, it represented a significant step forward when compared to late-nineteenth and early twentieth century social relations. These were characterized by unbridled competition, acute income disparities, and the absence of collective protections. Workers were exposed to pervasive insecurity and faced a day-to-day struggle for survival generated by forces outside of their control. They were at the mercy of events: illness, accidents, unemployment, age-related working incapacity, underpayment and so on. These conditions induced intense social polarization and social violence. By “freeing workers from the dread of the future”, in the words of the founder of the French social protection system, the “social state” instituted a fairer social order that promoted development, social stability, and materialised individual hopes for self-advancement and self-fulfilment. This statement has to be qualified to take into account the shortcomings of a model that never entirely conformed to the ideal-typical social state. Nonetheless, it usefully helps to distinguish between the Keynesian social compromise and the current state of social anomie.

In recent decades the nature and meaning of work has been transformed, due to the methodical albeit not yet completed deconstruction of the main frameworks of the social state (public services, labour law, social protections). In one way, the balance of forces between capital and labour, this can be interpreted as a regression back to the pattern of social relations of the early twentieth century. However, it is occurring in new circumstances and with sophisticated tools of governance that have little resemblance with the past. In the new normative neoliberal order, people are caged in impersonal mechanisms of constraint and

² The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines decent work as follows: “Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.”

control, their subjecthood denied. As Foucault has pointed out, the “new programming of liberal governmentality” (Foucault, 2004: 95) that emerged in the 1970s was founded on a voluntaristic project of social transformation and a doctrine of market primacy. Public policies were incrementally reconfigured and a new set of hegemonic values and norms became instituted, the aim of which was to govern *for* the market, to organize and accompany a thoroughgoing social transformation in which competitive mechanisms “act as the regulator (of society) at each instant and at every point of the social fabric” (Foucault, 2004). In this framework, individuals are expected to behave like micro enterprises in constant competition: they become elementary particles in a grand competitive machine. This implies that social policies are no longer conceived as a counterweight to economic mechanisms that generate high degrees of inequality. Inequality was reinterpreted not only as a ‘fact of life’ but also as an “objective” economic necessity “to which all are submitted and should be willing to comply to” (Foucault, 1994).

This carefully thought through political and social project implied the dismantling of the schemes of solidarity that founded the post-1945 social contract in Europe and other industrialised states. New public policies, which simultaneously promoted and were adapted to the restructuring of capitalism towards a post-Keynesian regime, institutionalized the erosion of the web of social rights and protections that gave people a sense of security but also of belonging in society. Systems of assistance have been supplanting the systems of social insurance, which aimed towards universal reach (Burgi, 2006). An essential component of the new “programming of liberal governmentality” was the reactivation of the old distinction between “worthy” and “unworthy” poor, and the introduction of means tested benefits that transmuted a universal right into conditional “favours” granted to the most vulnerable, and a system of punishments and rewards designed to establish compliance or at least obedience. This has fuelled the stigmatization of vulnerable social groups while simultaneously transforming the nature of social rights. Victims have been made responsible for their “fate”. As Frances Fox Piven et Richard A. Cloward (1991: 416) show in their historical study of the functions of public welfare, « periodic efforts to turn relief-giving to the purpose of work enforcement involve not only restrictions on aid, but efforts to change meanings by constructing elaborate rituals of symbolic degradation of those who subsist on the dole ».

New Rules and Principles on the Workplace

The new order of control and punishment imposed on the unemployed is mirrored by the reconfiguration of rules and norms in the workplace, which has led to new forms of domination and non-democratic governance. This is notably the case in the service sector, which has grown considerably in recent decades and encompasses a vast array of public institutions (education, health, social welfare, culture, police, etc.) and private actors (distribution, banks and insurance companies, telecommunications, tourism, catering, transport, etc.). The mass-service components of the sector have all undergone a series of uninterrupted restructurings and reorganizations, which have generated intense stress due to the synchronous and paradoxical demand of *standardisation* of relations and process (offering a regular service in time and space for a mass clientèle) and *personalisation* of service (adapting the service to singular users or customers). To resolve this contradiction, employees are summoned to develop their “initiative” and to demonstrate their “autonomy” and their “responsibility”.

However, this is an aporetic injunction since employees are not given the means to master the purposes or the objectives they are being asked to realise. Three points need to be emphasised here, to assess the impact on individual identity. First, the prescribed work (which is formally demanded, organized and controlled), and the prescription of subjectivity (the

injunction of autonomy and responsibility in the execution of prescribed tasks) is defined and programmed following a classic bureaucratic logic by highly specialised experts working in separate domains. Their prescriptions constitute a “cosmos of abstract rules” (Max Weber) disconnected from real work situations. Second, the prescriptions are defined with reference to an *ideal* of “ever more and better”, a relentless quest for mastery of people and things, for “total quality”, for “performance” (Dujarier, 2006). Objectives are fixed and conceived *in abstracto* to reach ever- higher levels of “excellence”, a limitless goal. Third, this “management through excellence” is singularly characterised by its denial of the difficulties, the limits and the contradictions that can and do appear in real work situations (what people really do and how they really invest themselves in work).

This denial is intentional. The prescriptions are ideal and impossible to implement, but they are enforced: work activity and results are subject to extensive controls and multiple sanctions. Moreover, the individualised evaluation of “competencies” and “performance”, which lies at the core of new methods of human resources management, encourages silence over the reality of work. When problems occur or disagreements emerge between employees and supervisors, the latter can easily and arbitrarily sanction, denigrate or ignore complaints. For instance, when employees complain to their hierarchy over a lack of means, they are typically told: “I want results!”; or: “There’s nothing I can do about it. It’s an order from on high”. In effect, the moral injunction to be autonomous and responsible addressed to employees makes them responsible for the dysfunctions of systems of organisation of work imposed from on top without consultation and outside of their control. This generates important professional and psychosocial risks.

Employees at the bottom of the hierarchy who are confronted to real issues and real people are obliged to respond to whatever prescriptions come down from on high through concrete acts. Even if they judge them impossible to fulfill, they cannot delegate to others the difficulties and contradictions that have not been resolved. They have to manage, immediately and most often alone, the tension between ideal prescription, on one hand, and limited means and real work conditions on the other. They cannot question the feasibility of the objectives defined since the normalisation of the ideal of “competitiveness” and/or “excellence” makes resistance or even questioning appear deviant behaviour (Aubert and Gaulejac, 1991). This *modus operandi* has a major effect on employees: injunctions of “excellence” oblige them to make believe, to act as if the impossible were possible (Dujarier, 2006). For the person, in the absence of collective organisations or structures defence, this has serious consequences. Repetitive “acting as if”, whether done through obligation or simply impotence to do otherwise, constitutes self-denying behaviour in the face of constant denials of recognition and of reality by management (“I want results!”).

Over time, self-denial affects the psychic and physical integrity of the subject and wounds identity. Negated in their social and professional values, deprived of their rights and often psychically and physically damaged, people are treated in the society of competition as if they were “numbers”, “budgetary lines”, as elementary particles of the economic machine. They are either useful cost cutters or “assisted” people who are considered useless burdens. The contempt showed towards employees, which is an inherent feature of the new corporate order, is part of the wider elitist disdain displayed in our societies for the population, as illustrated most recently by the insensitivity of governments and elite layers to large scale popular anger over the bailout of financial institutions that were the source of the present severe social crisis. In spite of waves of mass protest (UK, Greece, Ireland, France, Italy, Germany, etc.), which reflect dismay over the transfer of the costs of the crisis to the public, public services essential to the more vulnerable parts of the population are being sharply cut back if not dismantled, social rights are being curbed, and austerity imposed on all aside the rich who remain

favoured by feebly progressive taxation. Axel Honneth (2007) is undoubtedly right when he points out that the unbridled competitive logic of the new normative order has generated a society of *disrespect* in which intersubjective experiences of *contempt* have become the norm.

The risks of self-annihilation

In these circumstances, how can people (re)build positive social identities? There is no forward looking narrative scheme compatible with the universe of meanings (or rather the meaninglessness) associated with competition and *homo economicus*, the currently hegemonic social norm. The domination of economic managerialism and the erosion of rights have undermined the symbolic frameworks and the social frameworks regulating interpersonal relations that protect people from alienation by making meaningful interpretations of *events*. Mass unemployment has made employees vulnerable to sudden swings of fortune or arbitrary and sudden management decisions, hence increasingly silent and impotent. The individualisation of pay and careers, the dilution of the sense of belonging to a craft, the weakening of the unions have concurrently left employees alone in the face of work difficulties, the paradoxical injunctions of their hierarchy and the personal issues these raise. The unemployed are even more vulnerable, of course. But the threat to identity is similar. It is all the greater since individual psychology is mobilized to justify and organise the transfer of responsibility, which used to be collective, to the individual. The collective dimension of social issues is denied. Social issues are reduced to questions of interpersonal adjustment, to the treatment of individual “cases”. This leads to a focus on individual fragilities (the supposed *unwillingness* of the unemployed to make themselves “employable”, the insufficiencies of employees who supposedly lack *initiative*, *autonomy*, or *responsibility* and who are not *competitive*) rather than on the conditions and organisation of work or, more generally, a normative order that makes social insecurity and degraded work conditions a supposedly inevitable condition of life (Burgi, 2006).

At individual level, one observes diverse symptomatic reactions to this *social pathology* (Honneth, 2007). Sometimes, there are explosions of violence. The more common reaction, however, is an apparent passivity rooted in defence strategies (Dejours, 1995) designed to “anesthetize” suffering such as: silence and inward suffering (sometimes leading to illness), frenzied activism, the denial of reality, or turning against weaker persons (a subordinate, a colleague, a precarious worker, wives, children, etc.) (Burgi, 2006). My field surveys in large mass service firms show that the most common reaction is to keep silent and to try to avoid “making waves”. This “strategy” is generally preferred to speaking out in public because persons who rebel overtly or even affirm themselves strongly have a far greater chance of being fired, harassed or ostracized (Burgi *et al.*, 2008). The system of impersonal domination thus leads to docility. Its primary aim is to « capture the subjectivity » (Clot, 1998, 2010) of people and get them, whether they be employees or unemployed, to adhere actively but blindly to the imperious objectives of the new economic and social order, indeed to fuse themselves to those objectives. The system uses fear and mistrust, and fabricates indifference to the misfortune of others. It aims to make opponents bend, to impose a “consensus” which is then held up as voluntary (Lhuillier, 2002).

However, docility is not coterminous with identification. It cannot be interpreted as adherence to the new normative order. Rather it reflects the insuperable contradiction faced by people who in part have come to accept the discourse of competitiveness (for instance in large telecom firms) but who at the same are made to suffer at work (or for lack of work). As Dominique Lhuillier aptly notes, individual identity and subjectivity are shaped by collective frameworks and require the formulation of shared meanings (Lhuillier, 2002: 47). Exclusion, mistreatment at work or out of work, and being treated with contempt are *lived events*. But these systemic effects are not recognized for what they are since responsibility is shifted from

the collective to the person. People's lived experience is denied, not recognized. They undergo "negative moral experiences since the concerned subject is denied the conditions of a positive identity formation" (Honneth, 2006). They are confronted to repetitive experiences of *contempt* that erode self-confidence (denial of being a person worthy of affection) and self-respect (as a member of a community of equals having the same rights), and lead to a less of self-esteem as an active subject contributing to the common life (*ibid.*).

These corrosive effects express themselves in the interviews with unemployed or harassed employees in a number of ways: interviewees express the sentiment of being « diminished » or « mortified ». The unity of their lives has been broken and they are no longer in a position to give meaning to the present and to project into the future. At deeper level, they tend to turn against themselves, and feel responsible for the humiliations they suffer (Pezé, 2008). They feel guilty, as if they had faulted: "Why me?"; "What did I do to merit this disgrace?". Guilt mutates over time into shame (Gaulejac, 1996), a different affect that calls forth notions of having fallen, of relegation and stigmatization. The subject becomes cut off from herself and from the social group she had until then been attached to and which had played a protective role, losing the last threads of support she had. The shame of being useless or "nothing at all" forbids opening to others and sharing one's painful experiences. It leads to self-annihilation. People fall ill and flee their colleagues and quite often their own families. They wall themselves in silence, and silence themselves with alcohol. Depression adds new layers to the wall. Many young people evidence high risk behaviours, fleeing in hard drugs. As one young unemployed said: "Heroin doesn't lie". In the most extreme cases, suicide lies at the end of the road. In recent years, dozens of employees of Orange, the multinational telecommunications company that I have studied (Burgi *et al.*, 2008) have committed suicide for work-stress related reasons. One can also refer to the rise of work related suicides in Japan since the early 1990s (Kawanishi, 2006).

In sum, under the conditions of social anomie described, the narrative identity that gives coherence to life stories can only be deployed in restricted registers that tend to cage people into a one-dimensional identity. Georges Devereux, cited at the start of this paper, rightly notes that people thus caged are « very near to being nothing at all, and therefore to not being ». Going from the individual to the collective level, pathological identity (re)formation is evidenced in the deepening ethno-religious segmentation of our societies and various expressions of nationalism. These can be interpreted as effects of the atrophy of social life, the search for identity enclaves in an economicized society in which the struggle of all against all has come to predominate. At collective level we are also witnessing falling back on one-dimensional identities. Turkish Nobel Prize laureate Orhan Pamuk (2010) has aptly described this as *resistance to outsiders* : « When looking at the landscape of Europe from Istanbul or beyond, the first thing one sees is that Europe generally (like the European Union) is confused about its internal problems. It is clear that the peoples of Europe have a lot less experience than Americans when it comes to living with those whose religion, skin color, or cultural identity are different from their own, and that many of them do not warm to the prospect: this resistance to outsiders makes Europe's internal problems all the more intractable. »

As Honneth points out, citing Adam Smith, a healthy society requires that individuals be able to "appear in public without shame". Yet today, we are witnessing situations of growing anomie, of shame, self-contempt and the rejection of others, generated by a mode of social organization and domination that crushes the individual while claiming to bring her (him) freedom. This is a deeply troubling development. It is insidiously infecting society, affecting all aspects of public discourse (as seen, for instance, in the noxious xenophobia in most European countries), caging social subjects into pathological one-dimensional identities and corroding the core human rights values that should be at the foundation of the Europe.

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