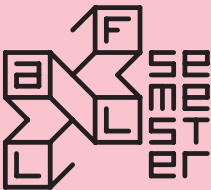
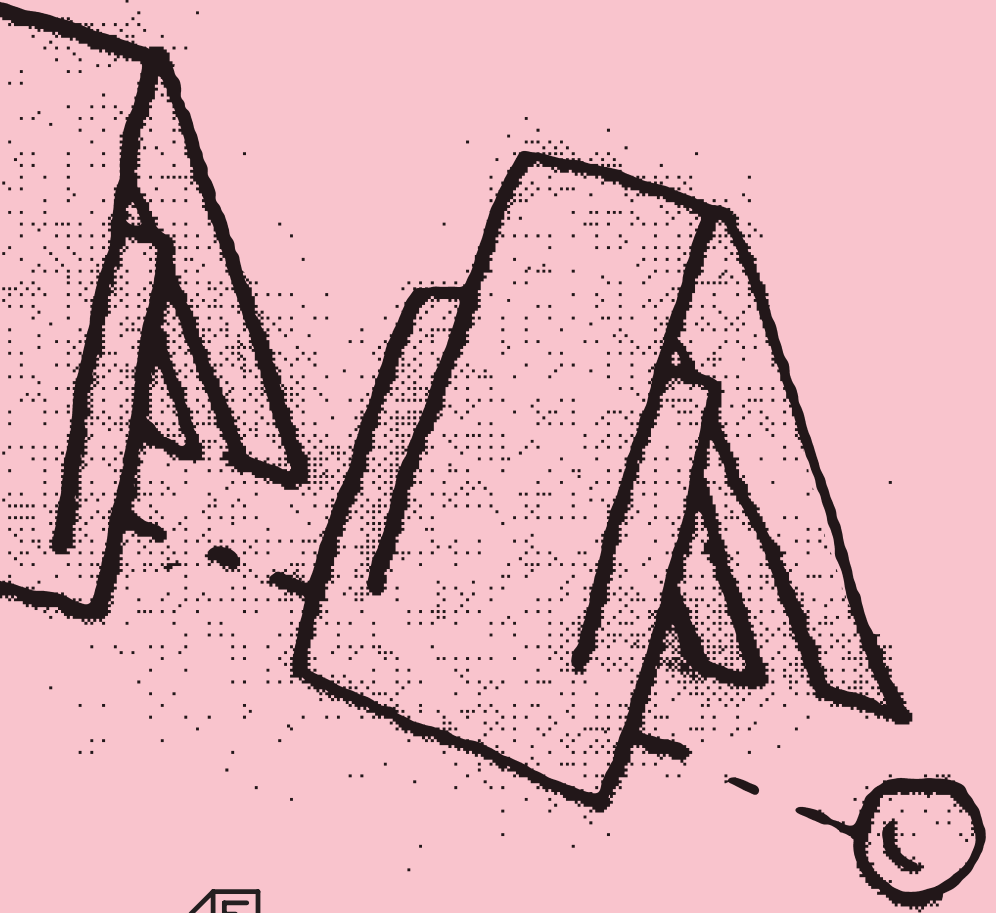


Ramón
Salas

Tales of
Identity



1. Identity.

Any inquiry into identity must start at the beginning and continue until the end. Because identity is a contemporary issue, yet as ancient as thought itself, given that we can only (attempt to) know that which is the same as oneself. This logical evidence is based on an ontological fundamental: since everything changes and is perishable we think (and think ourselves obliged to believe) that something permanent must exist. Metaphysics has been dedicated from its beginnings to think this fundamental, that which gives (identical) being to things that appear. Its first approach was so radical as to be innocuous: for Parmenides, what we see and worries us by its instability simply is not, since, as is

asserted by the tautology, only being is. It was Plato who postulated that the world of becoming had to have some correspondence with its twin.

If from all that is, only that which has identity merits consideration, this identity is converted forcibly and by force into the highest individual or collective aspiration. We say “aspiration” because identity, from the start, is not possessed: beings, for the sin of existing, have already lost it and can only regain it by returning to the ancestral model of that which they were originally.

2. Bourgeois Subjectivity.

This clearly aristocratic approach sustained a status quo over centuries which

compelled everyone to keep their identity, or in other words to make an effort to be what they had always been (rank, gender, race...). Status quo in that those who occupied the place of privilege were those whose genealogy could be traced furthest back towards "the origins". There is therefore nothing unusual about the bourgeois having put identity in crisis as the objective of their revolution. They couldn't base their aspirations of climbing the social ladder in their past, so they projected the source of their legitimacy into the future: they could not lead society by being the descendants of those that had always ruled, but by being the most capable of taking society on a route of progress. From this point on, vital projects would not have to follow ancestral models but mark out future objectives. We were no longer what we had always been, but that which we could end up being: the essence of human nature was not identity but perfectibility, the possibility of being what we had never been.

Bourgeois modernity uprooted individuals from their vernacular world, where everyone represented a role

(peasant, Christian, slave, women, aristocrat...) written many years before their birth. Endless possibilities of life were opened up to subjects who, in return, had to assume the responsibility of realizing their life. Adam Smith resolved this unprecedented concern with a simple piece of advice: all that was needed to be done was to buy what you needed from those who sold it at the best price. This was to be done without concessions of identity: we were not to buy from where we had always bought, not from our neighbor, nor from a member of our race or our religious community, but at the cheapest price. The market would then create a new scenario in which it would be possible to be recognized without gods, traditions or communities. Anyone hardworking enough could easily be integrated into this market which would allow him to rise professionally and translate this growing capacity of production into a capacity of consumption. Never epic, but sufficient to narrate a life with a set-up (an inversion by education of capabilities which would be demanded by the production system "for

life”), crux (a new system of trust: to the spouse, family, company, class, country, brands...) and a resolution (a deserved retirement, through climbing the work ladder, from which to contemplate everything purchased and say, like Zarathustra: “that’s the way I wanted it”).¹

This tale, which included a car with a spoiler, a parking lot in a mall, a single-family house, a garden for Sunday barbecues, a furnished kitchen, precooked food, and the unshakeable conviction that everything was going well, confirmed, with the spectacular economic development of the 50s and the start of the 60s, the triumph of anti-identity nihilism. The Fordist bourgeois, middle class and of average outlook, conformist and conventional, had converted being the same into his paradigm. He didn’t have an identity – his subjectivity was based on a career – but he identified himself with his professional and social class, his union and even with his electrical appliances. These apparently functional objects symbolically completed his material bourgeois world and

would bear witness to his personal success. Because the old bourgeois -who did not know programmed obsolescence- manufactured electrical appliances that lasted a lifetime. Although they had interiorized that their success depended on having a blender, they were not preoccupied whether they had a different blender from their neighbors. For this reason, when capitalism occupied all the space that it disposed of (in a world still divided in three) it did not find a place to sell more blenders, which provoked, at the start of the seventies, a crisis of overproduction: everyone already had the things they needed (so as to feel part of the group that considered themselves “everyone”).

3. the PostFordist CRISIS.

In 1973, the contradictions of the economic model sketched out by Ford and Keynes found a scapegoat: rigidity. Rigidity in large-scale investments for the mass production of rigid designs, rigidity in the work markets, rigidity in the

location and administration of companies, rigidity in the movements of workers, rigidity in the borders and tariffs of nation-states, in their taxation and their socio-industrial regulations... But also rigidity in ways of life, in the desires bound to them and, in consequence, rigidity in demand.

The diagnosis implicitly provided the treatment: the “flexible accumulation,” a new system of production and commercialization characterized by globalization of markets, geographical dislocation of the centers of production, relaxation of work processes and of access to finance, adaptation of supply to the frenetic changes in the habits of segmented consumption... This deterritorialization of production and deregulation of work entailed a deconstruction of the story of life.

At the end of the 60s and the beginning of the 70s, a generation born in monotonous rows of houses in the suburbs of large western cities protested angrily against the apathy of middle class society, which proportioned mechanisms of success “to

the population as a whole” (male, white, protestant) in exchange for conformism. Unlike their grandparents, they were not demanding more pay or better working conditions and social benefits, but life stimulus. They were not prepared to mortgage the best years of their lives learning a profession which would oblige them to stay bound to the same company, the same partner, the same house, the same car with a spoiler and the same blender. The same as everyone else. They rejected ties and bras, grey jackets and fitted suits but, above all, they rejected a story of life that devoted life to work in order to later acquire commodities which would make them equals. They demanded experiences immediately which would make them different. Post-Fordist capitalism thus was granted the symbolic endorsement that it needed to segment markets, re-orientate supply with a new economy based on experience (which by definition would need to be renewed) and adapt work relations to this fickle demand.

Hardly a few decades later, the “creative destruction of the economy”

(Schumpeter) led to the transformation of a society of wellbeing and security into a “society of global risk” (Beck) in which “free competition” moved from the company level to that of the worker, putting inequalities into play to the cry of: precarious workers of the world, compete! If during the first capitalism, the exploitation of workers was tied to disciplines which acted on the body, biopolitical practices of post-Fordism now acted on individual actions and desires by means of intimidation methods based on a social scenario which subjects recognition to constant renegotiation.

“None of the positions of relative inequality must feel stable or secure in themselves. The construction of the precariat, of the unemployed, of the poor, of the poor worker, the multiplication of 'cases' and 'situations' (...) aims to weaken not only the individual who finds himself in this situation, but also, in an obvious and distinct way, all positions of the work market (...). They don't just make the lives of individuals insecure, but also the relation of individuals with all the

institutions that until this point protected them”.²

The crisis of Fordism definitively separated the economy from use value: work was no longer tied to the satisfaction of needs but to their invention. The rhetoric of entrepreneurship and creativity has “improved” the traditional bourgeois promise: you can become whoever you wish, but not only by working enough, you must also find demand for your work, a new market niche that the system cannot imagine because it doesn't correspond to any preexisting appetite. A social pyramid in the form of eight (that of the middle classes had a rhombus form) doesn't divide exploiters and the exploited -categories that obliged governments with the moral responsibility to help the latter- but the competent (who see opportunities in risks), capable of imagining unseen modes to keep an unsustainable system functioning, and the incompetent (who see risks in opportunities), incapable of finding their own social space and imagining a future for the rest.

In this new schema of subjectivation there is no room for these tales of

bourgeois lives with set-ups, cruxes and resolutions. Today the only feasible set-up is by way of opportunism. Cruxes (marriages, children, mortgages, commitments, loyalties, possessions...) are only a hindrance to the capacity to adapt or relocate physically, professionally or mentally. Individual experience -fundamental in bourgeois society, characterized by the functional division of work- is only a handicap in an economy which is not based on solving problems but on inventing them. As for a resolution, it never happens, because stability is not an objective but an obstacle. The paradigm of "life-long education" conceals a process of permanent deformation in which we are obliged to invest "free" time dismantling our convictions and capacities to readapt them to a myopic system.

The new left aims to surpass the limits of Marxism -anchored in subjective models based on non-existent relations of production- imagining political subjects based not on work but on its absence. The precariat aspires to recognize itself as a multitude³, an "online" community, without anything in common (place, race, religion

or language), articulated around a debate⁴ and its passion for sharing. Hardly a few years after the formulation of this utopia, however, capitalism had absorbed all of their counterhegemonic approaches.

The corporations that functioned as paradigms of the new post-Fordist capitalism don't seem anything like the noisy, insalubrious and commonplace assembly lines where individuals dressed in blue overalls or grey suits repeat mechanical gestures in silence. On the contrary, their offices look like theme parks. They demand from their workers intense, personal relationships -team building, they call it- and a high degree of creativity. They generate benefits by lending their services for free so that their clients (in reality unpaid workers) express themselves freely and establish relationships. When their profits reach astronomical numbers, the owners, who go to work in T-shirts and sneakers, make donations to deserving causes. Affective capitalism generates a business model based on the collective desire (almost

an obsession today) to share, contact, participate, express oneself... In the wake of these paradigmatic companies a networked economy orientated towards intellectual and affective production arises, which has provoked exponential growth of consciousness and experience industries. Its products -which, far from being exclusive, increase in value the more people share them- do not distinguish between specialized suppliers and passive consumers, but generate “prosumers” who, whether by clicking “like” or leaving a digital trace, participate “actively” (even involuntarily) in the collective production of knowledge and opinion in a diffuse, direct democracy.

This business model, which has already become a culture, nevertheless consummates the global colonization of the living world on the part of post-Fordist capitalism. As Marx suspected, capital would not conform with our working time, but would aspire to possess our workforce, an indefinite potential that includes our creativity (that has to be employed to

improve productivity and imagine market niches), our affectivity (that has to be employed to promote client loyalty and lubricate the work environment), our free time (in which we have to watch over the competition and maintain our presence in the network) including our time off (that we have to employ by adapting ourselves more efficiently to the system’s changing and increasing demands). We are employing life itself.

In the past, a worker existed in a determined time and a defined space. He could, therefore, be controlled with ease. Today the multitude is expanded by an infinite virtual space and works all the time, so that they cannot be constantly repressed. But business is no longer about repression, but rather unleashing subjectivities. Power doesn’t have to be exercised on bodies, but circulates through them. It doesn’t have to generate identity models, but attachment mechanisms. It doesn’t have to produce material goods but forms of subjectivation. Business is in the paradoxical massive production of singularities, franchised forms of social

differentiation that externalize business in the social body (which doesn't charge for services provided). It is certain that fast fashion brands pay risible salaries to their suppliers from the Asian south-east. But they pay even less to us, their clients, we who identify with their conspicuous logotypes, for free, our chests full of pride. We invest self-sacrificingly in our look so that envy multiplies their possible benefits while we mock those who go beyond the norms of "socialization through appearances." We regularly inform businesses of our purchases and our displays of interest so they know where they must direct their business. Corporations pay us the real advertisers so little, as social networks do to their millions of suppliers of content, who selflessly devote their time and imagination to make platforms more attractive, which, by themselves, would have the same charm as an empty display.

Big corporations have successfully expanded their domains, multiplying the spaces where "integrated divergence" is practiced

and our affective needs are exploited. Capitalism feeds off its own incompetence in finding solutions to libidinal shortcomings. This dissatisfaction, transformed into obsession and chronic anxiety, feeds into a dynamic of lust and self-exploitation which generates further disappointment, closing the circle of capitalist perpetuum mobile. Debord could not even imagine to what point his valuing of experience would expand biopolitical possibilities of exploitation by means of the extension of the (auto)consideration of the subject not as a political subject but as a subject (in both senses of the word) of the "right" to taste, enjoy and realize a perpetually dissatisfied life.

4. The GLOBAL village.

This political economy of insecurity has brought back to prominence something that was lost for centuries. A multitude of individuals are incapable of imagining a future for themselves in this society that, at the same time, makes them individually responsible for achieving it. Therefore they

feel the logical temptation to recover their “self-pride”.

As we have seen, modern self-recognition, expressed in the formula “I would like to be + X” demands a rejection of what one was and a projection of life in the long term: to imagine a life lived decently, to give form to these inclinations, to make them public and plausible, to take responsibility for the sense of our desires and force ourselves to achieve them. The unseen difficulties that our system opposes to this personal program (and also to the collective project of reducing the thousands of those affected by the system to a lowest common denominator), encourages us either to acquire (for those who can pay for it) a prêt-à-porter identity of consumerist life, or to return to the pre-modern model of identity, based on the formula “I am + attribute” (of class, race, nation, religion or sex, with their variants: I am Muslim, black, female, noble, heterosexual, Scottish, a Real Madrid supporter, Latino...). This attribute generates emotional cohesion, demands nothing and requires no maintenance, doesn't present any challenges or aspirations, is offered as an

already consummated reality, a source of pride (curiously unlinked to ones own merits and acts), and even a source of supposed rights. Rights that, when not satisfied, feed a victimization that takes away responsibility of our circumstances, in the same way that the attribute takes away responsibility of who we are.

This personal disposition to return to the sources of vernacular identity favors the political tale where the traditional order, a rich and affective source of certainties, is confronted by a nihilistic, inhuman and decadent globalization. Radical identity movements try to capitalize on dissatisfaction, offering 19th Century solutions to 21st Century problems. This situation is understood less when qualified as “globalization” than with Marshall McLuhan's more complete and complex original concept: the global village.

“The current tendency which consists in opposing the dynamics of globalization with a phenomenon often described as a resurrection of 'the local' (and presented at times as a possible means of resistance faced with globalizing processes)

crudely reveals the ignorance of something that, as much for McLuhan as for Debord, was absolutely necessary: I refer to strict solidarity -if not identity- between globalization and the villagification of existence. It corresponds, without doubt, to the line of thought represented by McLuhan -and, therefore, to 'integrated thinkers'-, the merit of having brought attention to the "global" nature of our future (...). However, it also corresponds, to the critical orientation symbolized by Debord's manifesto -and, therefore, to 'apocalyptic thinkers' (...)-, the not least merit of having underlined, in a moment in which to do so made you deeply unpopular, that the world was found in a phase of 'territorial reordering' whose conclusion would be a reappearance -with more or less specific emphases- of old rural communities of agrarian societies, and that such a thing would be announced by still incipient expressions such as "postindustrial society" or even 'postmodernity':⁵

The cosmopolitanism / localism debate is often considered in an unintentionally untruthful way: a cloned world of uniform

and superficial habits as the opposite to another exotic world, full of differences and rich in local flavors. This telling encourages each territory to exploit and increase, in the frame of capitalism of experience, what David Harvey calls "monopoly rents"⁶: "authenticity" and "difference" of vernacular (almost always invented) traditions supply local resources for the global fight of everyone against everyone, attracting not only tourism but also a delocalized "creative class"⁷.

This triumphant combination of the romantic tautology -"we are what we are"- and the liberal tautology -"who has value has value"- makes it difficult to be recognized beyond the scope of the global village. Paradoxically, the global development of differences is realized in the frame of a process of economic integration which demands not only overcoming the zeal of nation states for their sovereignty but, above all, dismantling their old vocation of safeguarding the wellbeing of their citizens. Once this social version of progress is surpassed, that formerly identified Europe, the

romantic-liberal mentality will have led to, while capitals and products freely cross borders, the precariat of all countries not being able to aspire to having their socio-labor

rights recognized which once identified classes, since each village will work on alleviating their own global frustrations by means of local, romantic and emotional solutions.

1 t/n (translator's note): In Spanish, "Planteamiento, nudo y desenlace" is a set phrase to designate the basic structure of a narrative that has passed into colloquial language. Planteamiento gives the idea of taking on something with a determined focus, similar to an "approach". Nudo and Desenlace make reference to relations, which crux or climax and resolution, but not denouement, fail to do.

2 "Gobierno del miedo e insubordinación" interview with Maurizio Lazzarato by El Colectivo Situaciones,

in Lazzarato, Maurizio (2004): *Políticas del acontecimiento*. Tinta Limón Ed., 2006, p. 14.

3 Spinozian term which tries to distinguish from the homogenizing vocation of the Hobbesian "people". See the preface by Virno, Paolo (2001): *A Grammar of the Multitude*. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life. Semiotext(e), Los Angeles / New York, 2004.

4 See Warner, Michael (2002): "Publics and Counterpublics (abbreviated version)". *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 4. Pp. 413-425.

5 Pardo, José Luis (1999): "Espectros del 68", prologue to Debord, G. (1967): *La sociedad del espectáculo*, Spanish Trans. by J.L. Pardo, Pre-textos, Valencia, 1999. Pp. 27-28)

6 See Harvey, David (2002): "The Art of Rent: Globalization, Monopoly and the Commodification of Culture". *Socialist Register* 38, pp. 93-110.

7 See Rosler, Martha (2010). "Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism", *e-flux journal* #21 December 2010. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/culture-class-art-creativity-urbanism-part-i/>

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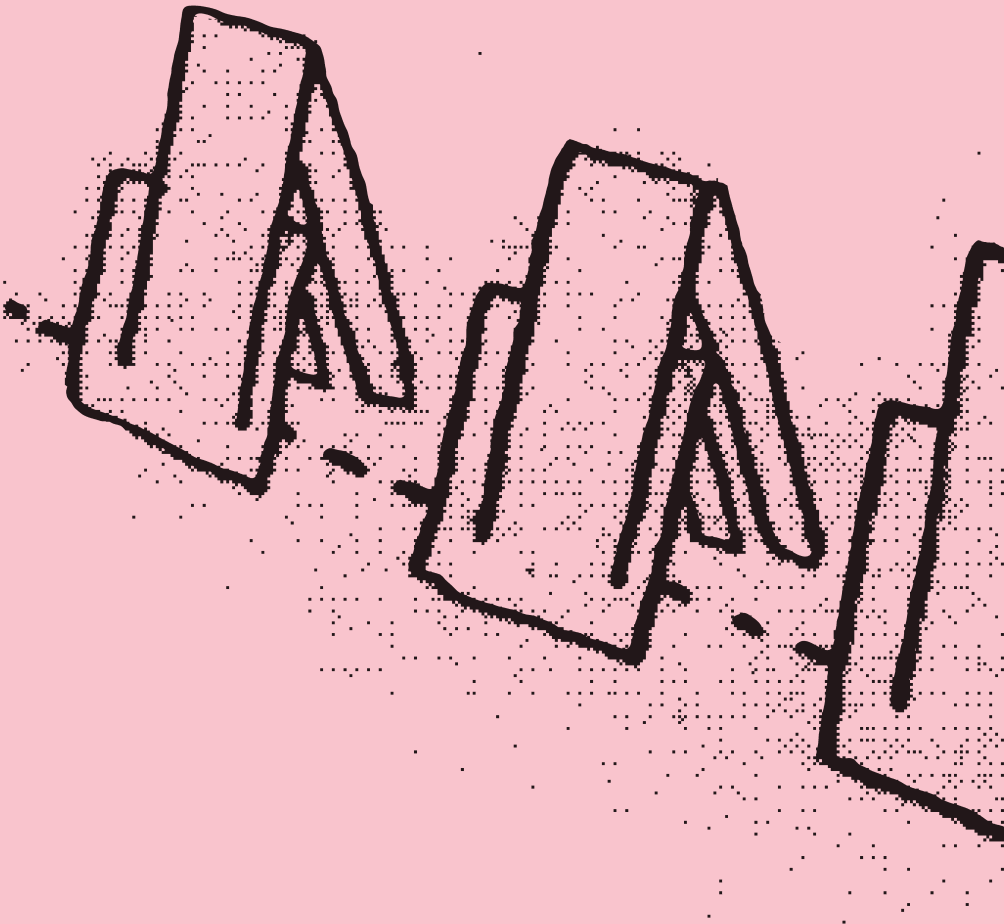
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