

The Network Structure of the Self: the Effects of Rituals on Identity

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Abstract: This paper explores the possibility that the self is structured like a network, and that it takes on different identities according to its internal configurations. It builds on Wiley's theory (1994) of the semiotic self and network theory as recently conceptualized by Fuchs (2000). The paper suggests that the semiotic self is a level of social association. It is the result of a structural configuration and, is open to solidarity rituals (both internal and external), and power-rituals, much like other levels of observation – such as encounters, groups, organizations and networks - are. Being a structure/container as opposed to a particularized essence, the self is also open to shifting outsider/insider boundaries: in other words, the observable outcome of the process of self-formation is the attribution of a network, i.e. personhood is constructed. The paper discusses the implications of a network theory of the self for the debate on identity politics, and uses historical illustrations from the women's movement in the US to demonstrate the ways in which essentialism and constructivism are produced.

Collective identity is receiving renewed attention in the academy. A confluence of political events (the emergence of “identity politics” in the 1980s, which consists of social movements making claims to ethnic, racial and gender justice amongst other things) and intellectual challenges from sociologists of social movements has opened new theoretical spaces. Collective identity is now used to address crucial questions regarding the dynamics of social movements (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). New Social Movement literature has long tried to capture the cultural dimension of activism by making the claim that there is something inherently new to contemporary struggles – their focus on identity, deriving from the move of social conflict from the economic arena to cultural grounds (Melucci, 1989). Some scholars have questioned whether the focus of identity is necessarily a new phenomenon (Calhoun, 1993), stressing the point that all social movements search for, and need to produce collective identities if they are to be successful. It is now accepted that organizing for social change requires cultural work as well as the material accumulation of resources (Snow and McAdam, 2000).

Sheldon Stryker (2000) has lamented however, the lack of precision of the notion of identity as used in the sociological literature (see also Polletta and Jasper, 2001): he suggests that the focus on collective identity should not obfuscate the importance of individual identity, which in turn is produced by commitment to existing groups rather than abstract social categories. In this paper, I want to expand on this point to suggest that, since identity work (Snow and MacAdam, 2000) happens in different forms under different circumstances, we need to turn to a theory of its social determinants. Identity, private or collective, is not an ontological or essential category. Rather, it is a social construction, and as such we can predict under what conditions it will likely emerge, and

what forms it will take. I propose a network analysis of identity, which avoids the essentialist pitfalls of structuralism but grounds the constructivist perspective in face-to-face interactions and the everyday occurrences of social groups (Snow and McAdam, 2000). I build the theory with the conceptual tools provided by Fuchs's analysis of "essences" (2001) and Collins's Interaction Ritual Theory (1990).

Furthermore, I argue that identity is not very useful an analytical category per se if not tied to a fuller conceptualization of the self. A micro-perspective on the internal dynamics of the self is needed to account for the influence of external social processes. The notion of the semiotic self of Norbert Wiley (1994) provides the most useful entry point to this kind of analysis, in that it elegantly accounts for the social processes that allow for the self to operate. Moreover, Wiley is committed to a universalistic framework: he sees the semiotic self as a universal property of all human beings. This contention, although very unpopular in times of moral relativism, allows for theoretical generalization. However, it is a voluntaristic position, expressed by Wiley's exclusive emphasis on reflexivity, choice and freedom. I argue that it is best to see these properties of the self under a sociological lens, because they are produced socially in the first place.

Identity politics serves as a useful entry point and illustration to this theoretical agenda. For greater clarity, I focus on a specific instance of "identity politics": the US feminist movement. In its rich 150-years or so history, the feminist movement in North America is a useful illustration of the dynamics of identity formation, essentialism as well as anti-essentialism. The feminist movement is comprised of both old and new organizations; both essentialist and "constructivist" ones. The interesting question is, rather, when are these movement organizations most essentialist, and why? Conversely,

when are they most constructivist, and why? To answer these questions, I turn to the development of a theory of self and networks.

Wiley's Semiotic Self and Fuchs's Networks

Norbert Wiley's The Semiotic Self (1994) builds an elegant structural model of the self by re-visiting the pragmatist take on semiotics, reflexivity and Durkheimian solidarity. Wiley's intent is theoretical, but he also uses his model to explain recent political developments: Wiley enters the debate about identity politics in the US and argues for a universalistic approach to the self, which he contrasts to the particularistic approach embodied by the "death of the subject" theorists (in his eyes, the offshoots of Hegelian thought such as Foucault and Derrida). According to Wiley, the Self is an open structure which engages in certain meaning-making activities: it works semiotically. Those who engage in identity-based political practices, on the other hand, can fall prey to "uncongenial identities", which appropriate the "generic" self, negate its semiotic autonomy, impair reflexivity and result in semiotic "malfunctioning." This process can be described as one of self-essentialization: the particular identity poses as the generic self, limits its plasticity and openness, and constrains its development by binding it to one interpretive scheme.

Wiley's model, in spite of its sophistication, does not address one crucial question: why do social actors resort to identity politics in the first place? Why do they embrace identities that can have unhealthy consequences for their own self-development? In other words, why would a semiotic self essentialise itself as a political strategy? Stephan Fuchs's Against Essentialism (2001) can inform the discussion of identity as a

process. In fact, Fuchs builds a sociological theory that explains “constructivism” and “realism” (i.e. essentialism) as outcomes of certain kinds of social structure, and thus point to the importance of external conditions.

In this paper I reconceptualize the semiotic self in terms of networks. I argue that Wiley’s self is open to this reading because it is a structure (or container), rather than an “essence”: it consists of reflexive poles – the I, me, you, and permanent and temporary visitors – that interact with each other, thus allowing for various network densities within the self. Indeed, Wiley shows that a particularized identity can usurp the autonomous self and have deleterious effects on the social actor. On the other hand, Fuchs’s theory of essentialism as a function of the social distance of the observer and the cohesiveness of his/her network, provides useful insights on the social conditions that affect the self-essentialising of a social actor. Whereas Wiley can be used to conceptualize the self, Fuchs provides a network-based account of “essences.”

Fuchs explains the emergence of essentialism as the result of *net-work*: a la Durkheim, groups that are socially cohesive erect strong boundaries and generate collective symbols that capture the solidarity of the group. The symbols became self-evident to the group: their social production is hidden, and they are equated with “reality”, the world “out-there”. They become essences. In Collins’s Interaction Ritual (IR) theory (1990), the process that generates “essences” are status-rituals: I call the solidarity that is produced through them “horizontal solidarity”.

IR theory points to another dimension by which social groups are stratified: power. I argue that Fuchs’s theory can be developed to include power-rituals. Social networks are usually endowed with different levels of power, and when they interact they

can give rise to situational solidarity that is different from the horizontal type: I label it (somewhat counter intuitively) “vertical solidarity”, to emphasize the unequal status of the participants in the interaction and its ambiguous effects on their identities (Collins, 1990). My theoretical task is to explain essentialist and constructivist identities in terms of interactions between networks that are stratified along two dimensions: status and power.

First, I discuss Wiley’s theory of the semiotic self to some detail and highlight some of its limitations; then, I discuss Fuchs’s work and point to its relevance to a theory of the self. Third, I sketch a brief comparison with other sociological theories of the self and identity politics, and finally move towards a theory of self and networks that helps make sense of the debate. Throughout this last section, I refer to the women’s movement in the US to illustrate possible applications of the theory to identity politics.

Wiley on the self and identity

Wiley argues that the selves are “generic human structures, and the identities, any one of which may or may not be present, are distinct from and inhere in these structures.” (p.2) Wiley’s intuition is to merge Peirce’s semiotic triad (sign-object-interpretant) with Mead’s notion of the self as inner conversation between the I and the me on the one hand, and Peirce’s self as a dialogue between the I and you on the other. “Mead’s I-me reflexivity and Peirce’s I-you interpretive process each becomes part of a more inclusive semiotic process, the I-me-you triadic conversation.” (15) Crucially, the I-me-you distinction allows for a conceptualization of the spontaneity and freedom of the self – which resides in the I of the present, also the occupant of the speaker’s podium; its

relationship to the social, through the me, the reflexive object of the inner conversation, which represent the past self; and the interpretive character of the self, which is produced by the I-you dialogue, where the you is the future self.

The self thus acquires an inner structure: it is a horizontal self, whereby the present I speaks to the future you about the past me; it is social, cultural, voluntaristic, and politically egalitarian. It produces a constant process of self-reinterpretation –the inner conversation -, which is “contained” by a semiotic structure. “The containment is functional rather than spatial or physical” (p.28), but is nonetheless a question of structure versus the contents of the structure – or, as I will argue, the outcomes of the structure.

Wiley further argues that the reflexive poles of the self are imbricated in the social structure. In particular, this is reflected in the relationship between the me, the you and Mead’s generalized other, i.e. “the internalized norms of the community or society” (47). Wiley criticizes Mead’s exclusive emphasis on the moral dimension of the generalized other and brings to the forefront its cognitive, reflexive, and conversational properties. He achieves this by relating the generalized other to the you as well as to the me: focusing on the word “other”, he suggests that it functions as a regulative principle “but also as a cognitive looking-glass” (51), which can provide a reflexive pathway to the you. Wiley’s generalized other “takes some of the looping burden off Mead’s generalized other” (51). He argues that “it is so closely connected to the me, for Mead, and to the you, for Peirce, that I will treat it as an extension of the two roles” (55). I will contend however, that it is useful to keep it distinct from the me and the you, and to treat its relative proximity to either (or both) as subject to empirical variation depending on social conditions.

Further, the larger structure of the self includes temporary and permanent visitors, terms that Wiley borrows from Goethe's conceptualization of inner "guests" who have the ability to participate in the self's internal conversation. They are figures who occupy a special place in the self's inner life: their presence can be sedimented in the very structure, such that "permanent visitors are always available for explicit conversation" (55). Overall, the self thus becomes a "public square" where a "community" of members is in constant conversation (72). It is indeed a populous structure, which leaves open the possibility that the relationship among its various components or participants (the density of their ties) can be theorized and empirically observed rather than assumed. This is a useful entry point for a network theory of the self, but lest I get ahead of myself, I want to first show how Wiley applies his semiotic model to the emergence of identity.

Identities have a semiotic location: as collection of signs, they are related to the structure in the same way individual signs are. However, their effects on the interpretive process are more consequential: Wiley distinguishes between "good" identities ("desired, acceptable, and workable for the person"), which can be "useful intermediaries between individual semiotic practices and the structures of the self", and "uncongenial" identities, which impair the semiotic power of the self.

Wiley further specifies the properties that are unique to the overall structure of the self, but can be appropriated, indeed usurped by a particular identity. One is "personal identity", the continuing relationship that the self has with itself, which at the structural level corresponds to reflexivity, but when appropriated by an identity becomes Sartrean bad faith. The fundamental reflexive channel is also a property of the structure which can be weakened by an identity; so is semiotic power or solidarity, a centrifugal force that

holds the self together and gives it self-recognition, but when appropriated by an identity gets distorted; and the “main reality” of the structure vs. the special reality of the identity. The common problem of the identity posing as the semiotic structure of the self is a sort of fetishism of identity, in a formulation that is strikingly similar to Marx’s discussion of the fetishism of commodities and alienation. Much like Marx, who sees the commodity form as hiding the exploitative relationship between capital and labour by masking it as a market relationship of exchange between equals, Wiley’s problem with identity politics is one of misrecognition such that “the container is seen as contained and the contained as container” (p.38).

The similarity with Marx’s argument comes from Wiley’s use of Hegel’s master/slave dialectic to express the problematic nature of the self’s recognition. Unlike Marx however, Wiley does not specifically address the power-dimension of this “exchange”. Partly, this is because Wiley’s critique is directed at Mead for overstating the capacity of the self to role-take, i.e. the self as communicator taking the position of communicatee. Wiley draws from ethnomethodology to show the labouriousness of the construction of a sense of mutuality, and thus points to extra-cognitive devices: “the truth or bindingness must come largely from the solidarity between communicators or, in Hegel’s terms, from the mutual recognition.” (p.122)

Reflexivity appears as a central characteristic of the self, which helps unite two poles: the self and the external or internalized other. The attractive part of this characterisation is that similar processes account for the self’s relationship to the self and to the external world. Reflexivity is an inner process which also accounts for the self’s outer experience. Similarly, Wiley uses solidarity in this dual vein: as solidarity within

the poles of the self, and solidarity with the other in the world. “The self is constituted in a cognitively reflexive manner, but in addition it is powered by a kind of emotion, itself also reflexive. This emotion, which is the psychological counterpart of biological life, is the solidarity that creates semiotic power. Without the reflexive triad this power is blind, but without the power the triad lacks cognitive force and therefore is meaningless.”

(p.114)

The notion of solidarity provides a useful entry point to the questions of identity, in that it helps specify the general condition under which an identity will assume salience. One of the mechanisms that allows for the production of identity as a symbol of solidarity is Randall Collins’s status ritual (1990), through the co-presence of various ritualistic ingredients – a group of at least two individuals, mutual focus of attention, and a common, transient mood, that will be transformed in collective effervescence, or for the individual emotional energy. Although Wiley is not very specific about how “uncongenial” identities come to dominate, I suspect that he sees them as the result of a process other than status-rituals. In fact, status-rituals are in his scheme constitutive of inner solidarity, and as such they are an integral and “healthy” part of the semiotic self. Conversely, “the politics of identity is a major producer of uncongenial identities and correspondingly self-destructive self-concepts, e.g. in the areas of ethnicity, social class, religion, gender, disability, sexual orientation, etc.” (p.36) The implication is that it is not something about the particular identity that makes it uncongenial to the individual self, but the process by which the identity is produced. This may be explained, as we shall see, because the emergence of the identity is tied to power rituals as well as horizontal

solidarity-building ones. By focusing on the dimension of power, we achieve a full account of identity formation.

Wiley is not able to incorporate this conflictual dimension in the semiotic self, and that probably results from his commitment to a voluntaristic framework:

“free choice is a reflexive act in which the I uncouples from the me. Routine semiotic reflexivity, in which distinct acts of choice are not made, entails less reflexive distancing between the I and the me, and no uncoupling. In the act of choice the reflecting pole, the I, stands back from and scrutinizes the me, the locus of memory, habit and earlier definitions of the situation. The I reviews previous responses to situations similar to the one being faced, and, from these materials from the past, constructs a completely new definition” (p.101)

Indeed Wiley shows that reflexivity of the second-order type (the first-order being the internal conversation) occurs in particular moments, when the routine of the first order is compromised, and thus is open to the possibility that it is the ritualistic work behind identity that affects the response of the I to the new definition. But Wiley’s I is very much unfettered, and unconditionally autonomous: it is possible to account for this aspect? At this point it is very useful to turn to Fuchs’s discussion of identity, since it starts from ostensibly opposite premises from Wiley’s, and perhaps can give some fresh insight into the semiotic construction of identity. We have seen that Wiley sets the premises to understand the development of “healthy” identities as part of the semiotic process of self-interpretation, and shows that things can go wrong when an “uncongenial” identity takes over the process. He does not specify however, the social conditions for intra-psychic domination.

Fuchs, networks and identity

Fuchs's contribution to the debate on essentialism lies in his project to perform a "comparative sociology of observers". Fuchs fuses network and systems theory: with the former, he shares the focus on the relational pattern of ties amongst the nodes of a network as the appropriate unit of analysis, thus considering "persons" and "actors" as the attribution of a network, and not the other way round; from Luhmann he teases out a sociology of levels of observation, which allows him to specify a four-level nested model of social aggregation – encounters, groups, organizations and networks.

There are three fundamental components to his theory: 1) cultures as observers; 2) levels of observing and 3) levels of society. The terminology can be slightly confusing in that the level of observation can account for processes of reflexivity as well as membership in different networks: as I will show Fuchs collapses the two by focusing on the social structure of the observer rather than that of the observed, thus positing reflexivity as the property of loose-coupling. In his schema, loosely connected networks are both constructivist in their interpretation of the world and tend to attribute the observations of others to their contingent social position. We shall see that the implication for the analysis of identity is that the social configuration in which an actor is embedded affects his/her self-understanding. Identities can thus arise and bound up the self in essentialist thinking: identities can be uncongenial, but that is not inherent to the identity, rather, it is the outcome of a network.

Observation is a crucial component in the following sense. According to Fuchs's reading of Luhmann, accounting for the observer reveals that information does not exist per se, but rather is the product of a distinction: "an observation is an observation of

something, and some thing, and not something else. That is, observing is an observer-dependent and –specific relation *to the world in the world*” (p.18). That distinction is the one drawn by the observer, and belongs to a network of related distinctions: on the other hand, an observer is “anything equipped to apply distinctions to the world, or more precisely, that part of the world which is an observer’s niche”. The reasoning appears tautological at first sight: however, it nicely illustrates an important implication of Fuchs’s theory, namely that self-similarity and redundancy are properties of dense networks, and occur at their very core. It is through self-similarity and tautology that a network acquires a realist identity: dense cores are what distinguish the network from what is outside the network. In other words, redundant ties are the “difference that makes the difference”, and create the outside/inside boundaries that allow for observation to take place.

The second component of Fuchs’s theory in fact refers to the distinction between first and second-order observing. First-order observing is the routine mode of attribution and operation of a network: it is common sense, or the phenomenological “natural attitude.” It is the observation of something, the “what” of observation. It attributes the outcome of the observation to the world, or the niche of the world that the network is concerned with. Second order observing is the “how” of observation: “level two attributes observation to an observer in the world or niche” (p.25). It uncovers the mode of observation that level one keeps invisible, and thus reveals the mechanisms by which the “essentialism” of the observation is constructed. Fuchs claims that any network is susceptible to second-order observing, but that shifting to level two cannot be done while operating at level one: the shift takes time, for one matter, and depends on the social

pattern of the network. More specifically, certain kinds of networks are more likely to be constructivist and operate at level two, which leads us to the third component of the theory.

Fuchs deems it crucial to concentrate on the social structure in which the observer is embedded, distinguishing among four levels of social association: encounters, groups, organizations and networks. His image is one of nested levels, whereby no level has ontological priority, and network has the highest explanatory power in that the nesting is itself a network. His theory is not reductionist, and tries to account for the variety of social associations that constitute the observer, and for the social distance that each level has from those that are nested within it.

The entry point for a theory of identity lies in determining what kinds of relational patterns produce what kinds of observers, and at what level: Fuchs suggests that a culture posits itself along the realism/constructivism continuum as a result of its social density. Dense networks institutionalize their truths in their core: hence, “realist cultures externalize the network’s outcomes to the world itself, or that part of the world which constitutes the network’s referential niche. Realist cultures curb or prohibit second-order observing”.

The conceptualization of levels of association allows for another important dimension: social distance. Fuchs builds a vertical element into his theory, as he claims that “the more remote an observer of a culture is from it, the more rationality, certainty, closure, and realism he attributes to that culture.” Crucially, distant observers are more likely to observe front-stages, that is routinised, official accounts of the workings of a network that make invisible its second-order observing. Although Fuchs does not spell

this out, the implication is that communication between the associational levels can suffer the most from the essentialising effects of social distance. Take his discussion of bureaucracy, for example: bureaucratic observing “restructures and renormalizes” complexity according to its own modes of operation. Encounters must be recorded in memos and minutes to make a difference within this organization; the contextual complexity of human experience is thus reduced according to bureaucratic norms of record-keeping - it is translated into “essences” that are then treated as objective facts about the organization.

There is a useful implication to the notion of social distance between associational levels, i.e. its relation to power. Let me state the argument briefly here, and I will develop it more fully in the course of the paper. When a realist network meets a constructivist network, one possibility is that they won’t communicate with each other: they will engage in the sort of ideological battle that Fuchs recognizes in the “Science Wars”. They will adopt a level-two observing mode vis-à-vis each other, contextualising the opponents’ observations and claiming truth for their own (this is Fuchs’s great intuition, that even a deconstructivist philosopher must operate in a code of objectivity when feeding his/her operations through the network). However, the question of power complicates the communication between different networks. Will the struggle end? Will it result in the dissolution of the network which yields less power? These questions are particularly important in the context of identity because the effects of the interaction between social actors embedded in different networks are registered at the level of the self: which network orients the formation of identity has important consequences. An

identity produced by a power-ritual will have a different relationship to the self than one produced by a status-ritual.

To better organize the discussion, it's useful to discuss power in Fuchs's sense. Fuchs presents two definitions: power as a social construction, e.g. "power is constructed as the ability to make a difference, and as the cause for that difference"; and power as that which allows for the operation of the network, e.g. "power is the juice that flows through the network, without ever being concentrated in a single source or reservoir. In this, power is much like electricity" (p.260).

It is possible to make a parallel between social power and actual power (power in flow) on the one hand, and what Randall Collins (2000) has called deferential power - D-power, and efficacy-power, or E-power on the other hand. Power as that-which-is-constructed is very much like deference: it is a social attribution that usually happens when the network puts on an official façade. Power-in-flow on the other hand belongs to the invisible part of the network, and has macro-consequences: "E-power is typically transsituational or long-distance; if it is real it must involve events which happen because orders and intentions are transmitted through a social network" (p.33). Within the bounds of the social ritual however, it is D-power that assumes the most social significance. D-power is "consequential for meaningful social experience, shaping the 'culture' of personal relations. A society in which there is much inequality in D-power will be one in which there are sharp differences in social identities, and a good deal of smouldering resentment and suppressed conflict" (Collins, 2000:p.33).

Crucially, D-power is reproduced through power-rituals, i.e. social encounters in which one subject (or network) gives orders, and another subject (or network) takes the

order: power rituals are inherently asymmetrical. Most important, power rituals produce a special kind of solidarity, which is quite different from the one generated horizontally by membership in a status group. If status rituals work within associational levels, power rituals work *across* and *between*. Let me spell this out more clearly: being an asymmetrical ritual, order-giving vs. order-taking can be conceptualized in terms of social distance between two status groups. Perhaps this line of reasoning is best seen in terms of ideal types, in that power is likely to work within levels as much as across. Tendentially, status rituals have an “equalizing” effect: they build a collective effervescence. Power rituals, on the other hand, build up mixed emotions.

“A successful order-taking ritual coerces a strong focus of attention, and produces strongly shared emotion. But it is a heavily mixed emotion. Insofar as there is successful role-taking on both sides ... the order giver feels both his/her sentiment of mastery, and the order-taker feelings of weakness. On the other side, the order-taker has a mixture of his/her negative emotions ... and the mood of the dominator, which is strong emotional energy, dominance, and anger.” (Collins 1990: p.36).

The common focus of attention, in spite of being forcefully obtained, ensures that order-givers and order-takers share a similar view point as the ritual is enacted: but its asymmetrical nature makes it a kind of misrecognition. In order to capture the hierarchical nature of this relationship, as well as its shared quality, let me call this “vertical solidarity”.

Order-givers are in charge of Goffmannian front-stage performance, whereas order-takers are relegated to backstage resistance, which can happen outside of the ritual. But what if the network of order-takers is such that backstage resistance is not possible? What if the order-givers enact a divide-and-rule type of strategy, so that the backstage becomes itself the realm of coerced rituals? To reframe the argument in network terms,

what if the order-taker has no cohesive, high-solidarity or “essentialist” network to fall back upon? In this case, I argue that the order-taker’s identity is thoroughly shaped by the power ritual, and that’s the kind of identity that is most uncongenial to the self.

Identity Politics and Social Theory

Having given a first sketch of the types of questions that a model informed by Wiley’s and Fuchs’s theories posit, let me ground the argument in the current sociological debate on identity. Craig Calhoun laments that social theory has ignored issues of identity for a long time, but that the possibility of a sociological understanding is very much open (Calhoun, 1994). Along with Charles Taylor, Anthony Giddens and Wiley himself, he has been a strong proponent of a theory of the self as a “moral” project that finds universal significance. He starts with a historical consideration: “discourse about identity seems in some important sense distinctly modern – it seems, indeed, intrinsic to and partially defining of the modern era.” (p. 9) In accordance with Collins (2000) – although using a different terminology, he finds the break-up of the Weberian patrimonial household as the necessary condition for the dissolution of all-encompassing identities, and for the shift to “private”, ascribed identities as meaningful schema. However, Calhoun is wary of social constructivist arguments that are as essentializing as biological reductionism, in that they efface the autonomy and agency of the individual and reinforce the opposition between nature and culture. Calhoun suggests that identities are political projects in that they challenge the division between private and public spheres, and entail collective and public struggles for recognition and legitimacy.

Actors “risk essentialism”: “where a particular category of identity has been repressed, delegitimized or devalued in dominant discourses, a vital response may be to claim value for all those labeled by that category, thus implicitly invoking it in an essentialist way.” (p. 17) In fact, recognition implies a claim to equivalent standing in specific fields, i.e. a resort to common frames of significance: the struggle is often aimed at achieving a “trump card” salience for a categorical identity, which often produces in-group essentialism – “a claim to a shared identity is not entirely coherent with a tacit relativistic ethics.” (p.26) Nonetheless,

“the challenges posed by projects of identity cannot be averted simply by asserting that those projects are embedded in essentialist thinking. We cannot really stop thinking at least partially in categories – and therefore in at least something rather like an essentialist manner.” [19]

In many ways, the current historic alternative is that of embracing privatized identities – and Calhoun is of course very adamant in his opposition to projects of self-realization that ignore structural conditions. Hence, Calhoun’s poignant rhetorical question: “should we really be more shocked by those who risk much to be true to high ideals and moral aspirations – or by those who are complicitous in the myriad daily horrors of banal evils?” (p. 29)

Charles Lemert (1994) proposes a strong critique of this position. He claims that “universal” theories of the self are built on moral grounds: the Self is connected to the good, but this very act obscures the historically contingent conditions in which “the good” is defined, and thus serves ethnocentric purposes. Lemert distinguishes between theories of the self and theories of identity. He puts Calhoun and other self-theorists in the camp of the “strong-we”, which he sets up against those who speak from a “weak-we” position.

“The strong-we is strong because it enforces the illusion that humanity itself constitutes the final and sufficient identifying group. Conversely, the weak-we position locates practically meaningful identities in concrete historical relations with local groups.” (p. 104)

Lemert questions the universality of the strong-we position, and instead attributes it to “delicate historical conditions”: “selfhood and the good- that is, the strong self and the good – are not [...] inextricably intertwined. They appear that way only from within strong-we cultures.” (p. 105) A strong-we culture is one in which “rival moral claims are incapable of compelling adherents of the strong-we position to doubt the universality of their convictions.” (p. 106) Thus, Lemert turns reflexive sociology against itself, and questions the moral, supposedly universal ground on which the self is conceptualized, by showing it to be an artifact of the position of a group of observers – in particular, white males in academia. Whereas Calhoun sees all identities as moral projects, Lemert rejects the self as a meaningful construct and opts for “weak” identities, the product of particular histories of oppression and struggle.

In presenting some empirical cases, Lemert contends that “weak” identities lurk behind even the strongest selves, such as a white, professional man whose deepest relationship to an adult while growing up was with his Black nanny. But Lemert conflates the self with the Euro-centric identity, and I think that is not a useful move: while it corrects for some of the moral tones that the self theorists are themselves prone to, it begs the theoretical question of whether we can conceive the self as a structure whose empirical manifestation (its identity) is subject to social conditions.

Yet another critique of the sociological debate comes from Sheldon Stryker (2000), who, as we have seen, disagrees with the conflation between individual identities and collective identities. His identity-theory has a microsociological component,

expressed in his commitment-salience-role choice model: “commitment affects identity salience affects role choice” (p. 27), so that an actor’s position within the social structure has certain effects on his/her role choice, mediated by an hierarchy of different, transsituational identities which acquire different salience during interaction. Stryker criticizes purely cultural and collective conceptions of identity for not taking into account the dialectic between individual identities and collective ones; similarly, individualizing collective identities results into an atomized and a-social view of the actor. For Stryker, commitment refers to social ties within groups and networks; identity is a cognitive schema that depends on the expectation that a certain role will be acted out. People are embedded in multiple networks, hence exhibit multiple identities: but they can carry over salient identities across situations, and thus give a salient identity a certain degree of autonomy in constructing the definition of a situation.

Identities have a motivational force: “if identities in general are motivations to behave in identity-appropriate ways, salient identities are inherently highly motivational: they strongly move persons to behave in accord with role expectations defining the meaning of the identities.” Moreover, persons will be strongly motivated to act on the basis of identities that have a high salience, and to seek interactions in which such enactments are possible. The theory does not specify under what conditions identities acquire such salience, or in Collins’s language, when they become symbols invested with high emotional energy. Identity-theory is nonetheless open to a kind of argument that points to the patterns of the social structure as covariates of identity salience: it is to this task that I now turn.

From horizontal to vertical solidarity

I want to explore the possibility that a network can be built into the semiotic self. Wiley splits the generalized other between the you and the me poles: he thus opens up the possibility that both structures of the self are interactional ones, and this allows for the use of network theory at the level of the self. I also want to suggest that the semiotic self can be added as a level of social association to Fuchs's model. In fact, Wiley's self is not an "essence": rather, it is the result of a structural configuration, and, for example, is open to solidarity rituals (both internal and external), much like the other levels of observations are. Being a structure/container as opposed to a particularized essence, the self is also open to shifting outsider/insider boundaries: in other words, the observable outcome of this process is the attribution of a network, i.e. personhood is constructed. If we take into account Wiley's full conceptualization, the semiotic self is actually populated with a plethora of "nodes", such as permanent and temporary visitors, which further give the "unfettered" I a sense of its social position in the world.

Wiley recognizes the importance of internal solidarity for the development of the semiotic self: but the inner configurations of the self that produce solidarity are diverse, and have different emotional effects on the identity of the actor. If identities are motivational (Stryker 2000), the internal process that endows them with such power has to be spelled out in detail. In Randall Collins's terms, high solidarity produces "emotional energy", which is a positive emotion giving the self enthusiasm, self-confidence and the willingness to engage in further status-rituals. Collins provides a theory of motivation, which can be used to analyze the dynamics of the self.

Solidarity binds the self: Wiley proposes that is the semiotic power that allows the self to operate, and results from intense status-rituals among its interactional poles.

Solidarity between the I, the you and the me makes the self open, autonomous, reflexive: this is a configuration of the self in which all interactional poles are able to produce the emotional energy that powers the self. However, I propose that this is a specific case, which does not exhaust all possibilities. In fig. 1, I present three more configurations of the self.

The self can be constructivist or realist about itself, and by extension about the outer world, depending on the internal configurations of its interactional poles. In other words, we can grant the I spontaneity and autonomy, but that will depend very much on the social (and by extension internal) structure that give the I primacy in the first place. In Fuchs's term, the I is an observer, but what it does observe is contingent upon the structure in which it is immersed. The two types of interaction rituals (power and status) work at the level of the self by re-configuring it in different ways. Michael Mann has described this process at the macro-level in terms of network "crystallizations" (Mann, 1993): the interactions of various types of networks congeal at higher levels in specific configurations. This is also at the core of Harrison White's definition of identity (White 1992). My argument extends this logic to "lower" levels: selves crystallize differently according to the types and intensity of interaction rituals in which they engage. This process is powered by emotional energy: by inhering to different interactional poles, emotional energy can bring each of them (the you, I, me and generalized other) into prominence, so that the self effectively orients itself towards it. It is best to consider the

effects of power and status rituals separately, and then to move towards a more dynamic model that encompasses the effects of network density on identity.

A self immersed in a status ritual experiences within-group solidarity and becomes an inside observer. The process leads to the production of Durkheim's "sacred objects": individual moods merge into a sense of "collective effervescence" which gets attached to collective symbols, themselves able to reproduce the feelings of solidarity – hence their sacredness. The external network of interactions of the self becomes dense: strong ties are produced by collective rituals that build solidarity. Internally, the social density of the interaction increases as well: the me and the you becomes sacred loci of focused attention and emotional energy. There is thus an alignment between the me and the you: the density of the social network of the self is reflected in its inner structure. The self is meshed into a collective identity, the future self looking similar to the past self.

The self is embedded in a high solidarity, dense group, powered by status-rituals: according to Fuchs, this is one of the conditions that lead to essentialism. A relevant historical example of this process of solidarity-building comes from a political strategy adopted by the women's liberation movement in the 1960s: the creation of rap groups with the purpose of consciousness raising. The question that has haunted the movement since its inception (its first wave, i.e. the struggle for suffrage from the 1850s onwards) is how to build a collective identity for social actors who are structurally fragmented: women belong to all classes and racial and ethnic groups, and exposure to different kinds of oppression makes the salience of gender identity a difficult achievement (Buechler, 1990). Rap groups were experiments in this direction:

“By nurturing the expression of feelings and experiences in an all-female setting, women were able to formulate alternatives to male-dominated

worldviews and belief systems. [...] C-R strategy put experience first, and sought to derive theory and strategy from experience. For many women, consciousness-raising had the irreversible quality of a conversion that fundamentally changed one's way of looking at the world. Having participated in a group, few women could return to their former ways of thinking and living in the social world." (Buechler, 1990:72)

The conversion-like quality of such experiences point to the importance of re-interpreting one's own history (the me) through the lenses of the collective identity: it is a re-structuring of the self under conditions of ritualistic solidarity. The social distance between the reflexive poles of the self decreases, which has a "de-essentialising" effect in Fuchs's scheme: if the observer moves up close to the network observed, he/she will perceive the details of the backstage, dissolving the official unity of the front-stage. This process runs counter the essentialising effects of the status ritual in a cohesive network: I suggest that this accounts for the self's active negotiation of identity. In other words, the harmony between the you and the me allow the I to direct the self's inner solidarity towards the creative refinement of the collective identity. Hence, I argue that decreasing social distance between the interactional poles of the self account for something different than Wiley's reflexivity: this is how "semiotic power", or Durkheim's mana, or Collins's Emotional Energy are produced.

The testimony of a woman involved in a consciousness-raising group well describes this process:

"Everything that happens in the world, I have a framework for understanding it. And that framework comes from the consciousness raising first, and understanding women's common experiences and my own experiences and the validity of that, and then seeing the rest of that through that validity.... If I didn't have a feminist framework to look at the world, I'd be, like most people, kind of adrift." (former member of the Women's Action Collective, quoted in Whittier, [1995](2003), p.104)

The activist stresses the commonality of the group experiences and her status as an insider of that group on the one hand. On the other hand, the fact that she mentions the “validity” of the experience and “seeing the rest of the world through that validity” implies that the collective identity needs to be negotiated within the context of day-to-day interactions. To an extent, the density of the self achieved in the status-ritual becomes trans-situational: it informs interactions outside the ritual because, as a sacred symbols of group membership, retains motivational force. Abandoning the identity would lead the activist “kind of adrift”, like most outsiders to the group are.

The effects of a power-ritual are different. The order-taker will have a strong relationship with the “front-stage” version of the self, as it is constructed through ritualistic obedience to orders: the front-stage becomes a sacred object. But the backstage of the self, the locus of possible resistance outside of the ritual, will be socially distant from the front-stage of the self, in quite a literal sense: temporally, as the backstage can emerge once the power-ritual is over, and spatially, as the backstage self will have to be constructed away from the purview of the order-giver. As Collins (1990) highlights, order-taking is thus an alienating role.

Let me rephrase this in a Fuchs’s terminology: the observer will be socially distant from the network observed, thus increasing the likelihood of essentialism. Power rituals are thus potentially essentializing, as they impose the order-giver’s definition of the situation on the order-giver. Althusser’s influential conceptualization of ideology as interpellation of the subject makes use of a power ritual as an illustration: the policeman hailing a passer-by, and the passer-by who turns and thereby accepts his/her ideological positioning within the dominant discourse. However, the logic of the network argument

points to the effects of the power ritual on the network of the observer, thus complicating the Althusserian notion that the subject is solely produced by ideology. It is the structure of the network in which the order-taker finds him/herself after the power-ritual that affects his/her identity “until further notice”.

To the extent that the power ritual extends to the observer’s backstage, so as to envelop it, the self’s network will be the one constituted by the power-ritual itself. In this case, the power ritual produces a network in which order-givers and order-takers are densely connected, and experience the kind of “solidarity” that is produced by power. The network of the observer will comprise of a past-me, with its symbols charged up by the power ritual; and an uncertain you, belonging to a realm of future interactions in which the possibility for horizontal solidarity has been undercut by the expectation of yet another round of power rituals. Furthermore, the generalized other will reflect the point of view of the order-giver, that is the actor who gains emotional energy from the interaction. What will the I observe in such a situation? It will see a charged-up, essentialist me, product of the power ritual; and a loose, decoupled you, mired in uncertainty, skepticism and inner conflict – the equivalent of Fuchs’s constructivist networks. The observer is then drawn towards the reflexive pole that has a highest stock of emotional energy attached to it: the me. Through this mechanism, we have a different type of identity: one imposed by the order-giver, powered by an ambiguous, yet consequential “vertical solidarity”.

I argue that this is the kind of “uncongenial” identity that Wiley sets up the free semiotic self against: it is the identity that essentializes one’s position within the social

structure and makes political claims from it. A historical illustration of the embracement of such an identity comes from the temperance movement in the 1870s.

“As the lives of women and men became more separate and distinct, as women became more exclusively involved in child care as a specialized role, and as the home and the family come to be seen as a distinct sphere for which women were well suited by nature and training, the premise of overriding difference between the sexes appeared to many to be a truism. Temperance became a “women’s issue” when alcohol came to be seen as a threat to the stability of the home and the family[...]. ... the temperance movement implicitly assumed male dominance and explicitly defended the conventional family.” (Buechler, 1990)

Actors involved in the temperance movement spoke from a subordinate position, created by power-rituals in which women became identified with the “private” sphere. Women’s issues thus became “essentialized” in terms of family and home needs. The temperance movement is perhaps best seen as “proto-feminist”: it does show however, the pitfalls of a kind of resistance that does not acknowledge the pervasive nature of power-rituals.

Similarly, the late suffragist movement embraced a racist ideology that linked suffrage with white supremacy: while trying to put forward an emancipatory agenda in gender terms, it played into the worst racial stereotypes that revealed solidarity towards white men to be more meaningful than solidarity towards black men and women. Interestingly, both movements arose in times of anti-feminist backlash, when power-rituals become more frequent and salient and social movements have to adopt defensive strategies.

Power-rituals work as well within groups, so that essentialist identities can become ever more exclusionary and boundary setting: the search for ideological purity then weakens the focus on political creativity. An indication of this process is the presence of anger:

“In the early seventies, when I was eating and breathing and sleeping feminist activity, I was so angry! I was really fueled by fury a lot of the

time. [...] When you're angry, other people are intimidated and they don't want to do what you want them to do. It really sets up an opposition.”
(quoted in Whittier [1995]2003:110)

Anger can be an ingredient of the mixed emotions that power-rituals generate in order-takers (Collins, 1990). Summers-Effler (2002) argues however, that anger per se is not paralyzing, but becomes so if coupled with low levels of emotional energy and lack of hope for successful future interaction rituals. The implication is that the network of the observer is the crucial realm in which the possibility of solidarity-building interactions is evaluated. If the opportunities for successful interactions are scarce, the solidarity of the network is compromised and power is turned inwards against the self.

Taylor ([1989]1997) describes this process in the transformation of the National Woman Party from a cosmopolitan group to an elitist one:

“As one member put it, “no mass appeal will ever bring into the party that type of a woman who can best carry forward our particular aims. We are an ‘elect body’ with a single point of agreement.”” (Taylor, [1989]1997:431)

The member stresses the importance of the insider/outsider boundary: her use of terms like “particular aims”, “elect body” and “single point of agreement” speak a great deal about the exclusionary politics that results from the occurrence of power-rituals within the group and the prominence of the generalized other. Nonetheless, Taylor's argument is that, in a time of political backlash, a “cadre” of feminists maintained the networks that allowed for the movement's re-emergence in the 1960s and 1970s: hence the elitist tones of the “movement in abeyance” were partly a response to a polarized political environment. That the women's movement was able to refashion itself points to a process of transformation that dense networks can go through when they expand back into cosmopolitan structures. I have explored the effects of status and power rituals on

observer embedded in dense networks: in the first case, a network of horizontal solidarity, and in the second a network of vertical solidarity (solidarity along the power dimension). The logic of the argument implies that the effects of a power-ritual will be different on horizontal cohesive networks than on vertical cohesive networks. The former, by adopting strategies of solidarity-building, are more likely to activate oppositional identities that are constructed through status rituals; the latter, by allowing power-rituals to constitute new, essentialist identities, are more likely to produce reactionary identities. Proceeding in ideal-typical fashion, there are two more possibilities to explore: loose networks with horizontal solidarity; and loose networks of vertical solidarity. I now turn to the discussion of these two types.

Loose Networks: Constructivism and Conservatism?

Loose networks are in Fuchs's scheme constructivist about the world they observe, and about the conditions that produce the observation. A self embedded in a loose network is thus more likely to exhibit reflexivity about the self and the outer world, thus coming close to Wiley's semiotic self. However, networks and selves are subject to power and status rituals: the project of maintaining the reflexive channel open is always tenuous and fleeting, and under certain social conditions very unlikely.

Randall Collins (2000) gives a suggestive analysis of the ways in which power-rituals are fragmented when they operate in loose networks: "Overall it appears D-power has become milder in character where it does occur; and its occurrences have become fragmented into specialized enclaves where yes-sir! micro-obedience is established." (p. 35) Micro-situationally, one's authority within a network does not translate into

deference power in different networks. We may thus say with Collins (2000) that contemporary US society is one of “impersonal bureaucracies and privatized networks”, whereby “What is left is our individual reputations, most of which carry little social charisma, little of the *mana* of social emotion which attract desire for contact or the propensity to give deference.” (p. 40) In this scenario, identities are constructivist in that they are validated only within network enclaves: communication between enclaves does not recognize such identities. The self that emerges from this network configuration is one in which the generalized is attenuated and the me takes the speaking podium. Personal experience is only useful insofar as the observer is in its own network, but for a few of us – like celebrities (Collins 2000) who remain at the center of the public’s attention and acquire Durkheimian sacredness. However, the fragmentation of the network produces moral relativism – social distance between networks produces inter-group essentialism. Also, it weakens the generalized other and brings the me to the forefront: loose, differentiated networks produce individualism, in the classic Goffmanian situation in which the self becomes the product of a successful interaction. The me, as the repository of these positive experiences, acquires prominence within the semiotic structure of the self, and signals the privatization of public networks. The kind of vertical solidarity that powers these networks (and by extension, selves) is what Collins calls “microsituational stratification”, that is power rituals that command the focus of attention in time-bounded situations. In a sense then, we have a stratification of “mes”, in that certain reputations are still connected to the generalized other – that is, to an extent they are still transsituational, and thus carry surplus deference power – but most of them do not.

We have thus seen that loose networks are constructivist, a point which Fuchs makes very clear in his discussion of “deconstruction” (Fuchs and Ward, 1994): the implication is that, by producing me-oriented selves, they are also fundamentally conservative, generating the kind of normalcy that Sartre decries as “bad faith”. But the theory of self and networks would not be complete without a fourth possibility: the type of network structure that constitutes a you-oriented self. I argue that this too is a property of loose networks: but ones powered by horizontal, rather than vertical solidarity.

At first sight, this is a contradiction in terms: loose networks are ones in which ritualistic solidarity is low, and “weak” ties dominate over redundant relations (Granovetter, 1973). I argue however, that by using different levels of observation as units of analysis, horizontal solidarity can be conceptualized as the activation of weak ties between network cliques, or as the emergence of repeated patterns of interactions among dense selves. Using Durkheimian terminology, it is cosmopolitan networks that are more likely to exhibit these kinds of interactions: in particular, networks where cliques of strongly tied actors start communicating with one another. Although the network structure is similar to the me-oriented networks, the loose horizontal networks are stronger on the status dimension than on the power one. They exhibit alliances between status groups, and thus show emergent patterns of solidarity-building.

Why is this network structure of the self you-oriented? The you is the future of the semiotic triad: it is the interactional pole that represents freedom-in-a-moment, to whom the I speaks non-reflexively (Wiley, 1994: p.49). It stands to the I as an object ready to become subject: it represents a realm of future possibilities. The openness of this

pole makes it full of uncertainty: but under certain social conditions, this very openness works as a magnet for emotional energy.

It is in cosmopolitan movements and networks that are relatively free from power rituals that the you orients the semiotic self: when the focus is on alliance building and allowing for future interactions with unfamiliar networks that nonetheless promise emotional gains, the you acquires prominence within the self. The you becomes motivational.

There are moments in the women's movement in which the you takes this motivational position: for example, the late suffragist movement managed to build cross-class alliances to put forward its voting rights agenda, and shifted to a platform emphasizing differentiation rather than essentialism. "Whereas the earlier movement invoked justice and equality themes and the middle movement appealed to women's distinctive capacity for social reform, the later movement spoke with a plethora of voices. [...] ... the later movement was more attentive to the differences between women and managed to convert these differences into a movement resource." (Buechler, 1990: p.100). Importantly,

"New awareness of differences among women helped to modify the older premise of differences between the sexes. The effect was to devalue unqualified, essentialist conceptions of a universal female nature shared by all women, and to promote more nuanced, situational, and environmental accounts of both the differences between men and women and the differences among women" (Buechler, 1990: p.102).

Similarly, almost a century later the famed slogan "the personal is political" was borne out of the attempt to overcome the structural constraints of the women's movement through consciousness raising: consciousness groups provided the initial impetus for a

“politics of the you” – solidarity building within a cosmopolitan network. That some groups veered towards female cultural nationalism or female chauvinism (Hole and Levine, in Buechler, 1990), is a reminder that the boundaries between different types of networks are porous: networks are always emergent, and are especially so when they are constructivist – always in danger to fall prey to the “iron law of oligarchy”.

The you-oriented self is non-essentialist because it has to deal with difference: its identity emerges from repeated interactions, but is constantly put in question. Academic feminism is a good example: a cosmopolitan network that makes non-essentialist claims about identity. More generally, you-oriented selves emerge during collective actions: for the you to become a sacred object, the ingredients for a successful have to be present. For instance, note the tone of the testimony of this activist of the Women’s Action Collective (a radical feminist group funded in Columbus, Ohio in 1971):

“I find it very difficult to keep friends these days, because I don’t run into anybody naturally. Like I used to just every day go into work, you’d see all these people. You’d make plans to do things: it was just part of the flow. Now it’s like you never see anybody, and you’ve got to call somebody up and make plans, it’s this big effort.” (quoted in Whittier [1995](2003), p.114)

The activist conveys the sense of emotional satisfaction that derives from living in a flow of identities, where the open-endedness of the you generates the excitement of being part of an emergent network. Moreover, she contrasts that experience with the return to the realm of privatized networks, where once-again dominant mes routinize daily life and close off opportunities for diverse interactions.

Conclusions

By drawing on Wiley's and Fuchs's theories of "essences", I have tried to make both perspectives compatible. I have chosen power as the main analytical dimension which both theories seem silent about, and suggested a mechanism by which the "uncongenial" identities that Wiley refers to can be a product of the social network in which the self is embedded. Moreover, I have tried to render Fuchs's model open to conflict between levels of social association, although I have restricted the discussion to the relationship between the self, and the networks. Possibly this approach can be further qualified by examining the power interactions between encounters and groups, groups and organizations and so on. I have suggested that at the level of the self social distance between networks, the observer's network density and the observer's identity are useful analytical tools through which the emergence of identity politics can be explained.

By using the network approach, I have also shown that "identity politics" is a label that describes a variety of essentialist as well as constructivist movements: I have used a few illustrations from the rich history of the women's movement to show that the critique of identity essentialism must be wary of political and structural conditions under which identities arise.

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Table 1:

		Network Density (Self)	
		Loose	Cohesive
Solidarity	Vertical	Constructivist, privatized identities (me-oriented self)	Essentialist, reactionary identities (me-cum-generalized other oriented self)
	Horizontal	Constructivist, egalitarian identities (you-oriented self)	Essentialist, oppositional identities (me-I-you dense self)