

Recognition and Reception. On Pizzorno, Identity and the Mask*

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Abstract

Starting from his early observations on the mask and drawing also on his interview on the subject, this paper considers Alessandro Pizzorno's theory of identity building as recognition looking in particular at his last works. The metaphor of the mask helps us to understand the mechanisms of identity constitution, the dialectic of hiding and revealing, and with it the ambivalences of modern subjectivity. For Pizzorno, in modern societies, individuals must represent themselves as a function of the expression of a deep identity; they must create their own masks and make them recognizable. The process of reception, and the circles of recognition wherein identities are embedded are the proper object of sociological analysis as it is through them that identities get entrenched.

Keywords: identity; Pizzorno; mask; recognition; reception.

Arguably the foremost Italian sociologist of the second part of the Twentieth century, Alessandro Pizzorno (1924–2019) has contributed to many aspects of social theory and sociology. This has included his early studies of social stratification (Pizzorno, 1959); his analysis of the relevance of the middle classes and trade unions in Italy (Pizzorno, 1980); his work on political theory and the transformation of parties and protest (Pizzorno, 1993)[†]; and his more recent collection of essays on rationality, representation and recognition (Pizzorno, 2007). Several of his essays, later collected in Italian, were originally published in English, which allowed his work to become well-known outside of Italy. This renown was furthered by teaching positions at Oxford, Teheran and Harvard, alongside those at Milan, Urbino and the European University Institute.

* Part of this essay draws on my Afterword to the publication of Pizzorno essay on the mask as a book in 2008, see Pizzorno (2008).

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1. Part of this book, *Le radici della politica assoluta e altri saggi*. (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1993) appeared in 1981 as “Interests and Parties in Pluralism” in S. Berger (Ed.), *Organizing Interests in Western Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Part of this book also appeared in 1987 as “Politics Unbound” in C. S. Maier (Ed.), *The Changing Boundaries of the Political: Essays on the Evolving Balance between the State and Society, Public and Private in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

His work has spanned over fifty years and has accompanied both the progress of social theory internationally and the development of Italian society — see, for example, his inspiring book *Comunità e razionalizzazione* [Community and Rationalization] (Pizzorno, 1960). His first essay *Saggio sulla maschera*, originally written in the early 1950s during his stay in Paris, was published in Italian only in 2005 by the journal *Studi Culturali* (Pizzorno, 2005, later re-published as Pizzorno, 2008), and translated into English a few years later by the journal *International Political Anthropology* (“The Mask: An Essay,” 2010). The interview with Pizzorno, which is here presented in English, originally accompanied the publication of the *Saggio sulla maschera* in Italian. It allows us to reconstruct the thoughts of Pizzorno in and beyond his original inspirations. Rich with enthralling memories but also tracing the fascinating threads of his thought, the interview was conducted in Pizzorno’s study at the European University Institute, where he remained Emeritus Professor until his death. In it, Pizzorno himself bears witness to the importance of his reflections on the mask (see also della Porta, Greco, & Szakolczai, 2000), underlining the role of his Parisian years in his development both as an academic and a person. We can therefore discover a series of bridges between his first work and his widely known, recent studies on collective identity (Pizzorno, 1993) and, above all, rationality and recognition (Pizzorno, 2007).

Pizzorno had been fascinated by the “mask,” an object which in his view mediates between person and role, by intimate experience and public representation and by individual and collective identity. He intended the essay on the mask to be part of a far wider project on *Uomo personaggio* [Character-Man], which would have also included chapters on festivals, dance and the spectator. The project was never developed in its entirety, but an intellectual curiosity for the constitution and representation of individual and collective identity was to become a trademark of the entirety of his work. As Pizzorno (2005) reminds us in his essay on the mask, human societies have always created masks, ritual objects that function as bridges to the sacred, allowing us to embody a collectively recognizable public identity, thereby overshadowing a deep and never fully communicable private identity.

He reconstructs the anthropological tradition to consider how the mechanisms of representation and recognition through masks in traditional societies have turned out in our society. Even if the modern subject can play in disguise, the mask has essentially become an artistic object, which falls within the domain of aesthetics and fantasy. The modern individual no longer wears ritual masks that establish, by alluding to an essential cosmology, social order. Yet the metaphor of the mask still helps us to understand the mechanisms of identity constitution, the dialectic of hiding and revealing, and with it the ambivalences of modern subjectivity. In modern societies, individuals must represent themselves as a function of the expression of a deep identity; they must create their own masks and make them recognizable. Representation and recognition no longer rest on a firm and ritually shared ground, but instead are based on the capacity of subjects to state that they are identical to themselves (Pizzorno, 2005). For Pizzorno as for Foucault, modernity is an ambivalent phenomenon: it “does not liberate man in his own being, it compels him to face the task of producing himself” (Foucault, 1984, p. 42).

Still, reception is fundamental in self-constitution. Pizzorno asks us to think about the mask without presupposing a subject who intentionally masquerades for an audience as on a stage, focusing rather on the network of relationships established through the mask between subject and audience. Relationships and recognition are co-constitutive; we should consider the dynamics of recognition not as a form of “psychological identification” — a “believing” or “not believing” in the identity that is assumed when wearing a mask or accepting a role — but as a social performance, located in precise contexts.

Along these lines, the metaphor of the mask allows us to conceive identity as it appears in Pizzorno’s last collection of essays not as a “subjective sentiment but [as] an *attribution by others*, an operation of recognition” (Pizzorno, 2007, p. 92). The dialectic between identification and disidentification, between presence and absence that Pizzorno (1993; 2007) will place at the foundations of the social forms of recognition in his major works is already clearly outlined in his work on the mask. The mask conceals and reveals at the same time, but even in secret societies, “hiding it is only a moment in function of appearing as of revealing” (Pizzorno, 2005, p. 99). What is most, being recognized and recognizing oneself is also — and fundamentally — a way of communicating with others by building, for oneself and for others, an identity that in turn, recursively appears as a condition of communication.

In the essay on the mask, as in his more recent works, the centrality of recognition and its being a social and public fact are therefore emphasized. Recognition is a process by which people are named or

placed in predefined categories using a plethora of both heterogeneous and shared signals, from badges to professional titles. It is in this continuous game of reinterpretation of these signals that the social order gradually becomes established (Pizzorno, 2007, chapter 7). From the beginning of his work, Pizzorno's thoughts on identity align with those "attributive" positions which we find in Wright Mills and Kenneth Burke as well as in Foucault and in ethnomethodology (Sciolla, 2000), while he distances himself from "intentionalist" theories *à la* Davidson or Elster (Cella, 2007).

Indeed, what concerns Pizzorno in his later works is above all the relationship between rationality and reception, and not the relationship between rationality and intentionality. He thus famously reinterprets a Weberian example, the actor who, in the name of a value, pursues earthly aims which are impossible to achieve, to stress that his action, although vain in terms of external purposes, finds justification in its being "done together with others" (2007, p. 157). Sociological explanation has to consider not so much the intentions of the actor, but "the meanings that his actions receive by other participants to the situation in which they take place" (*ibidem*).

Returning to the mask metaphor, we should not consider what is hypothetically under the disguise of a mask, but precisely the possibility of mutually recognizing each other using the identity offered by shared symbolic forms, such as the masks themselves. In other words, identity is not an expedient, a means to achieve a goal, nor is it an end or a good to be maximized. Here, Pizzorno collides with neo-utilitarian positions, which inevitably work with a pre-established and normative view of the subject and with a rootless and non-procedural notion of social action (see Pizzorno, 1986 and 2007, chapter 1). Identity is the substance and product of social action. Pizzorno's metaphor of the mask differs from the metaphor of the theater used by Goffman (1959). As Pizzorno explains in this interview, the Goffmanian dramaturgical subject "already exists as a person," instead "with each movement of the mask, each time the identity of a person is recreated." The mask as a form of shared recognition is a way to focus on the idea that, as Garfinkel (1967) would say, identity is a continuous, concerted, social realization and not a game of impression management. It is a process of learning, of negotiating reality: we learn to be what we are, and rather than interpret a part, we use every possible opportunity — every possible mask — to understand how it is appropriate, just and natural that a person like us behaves.

Pizzorno's approach to identity is markedly non-individualistic. As suggested, he has clarified that it is the foundations of cultural reception and not the intentions of the individual that determine the meaning of social action, and as such the former are the real objects of sociological explanation (Pizzorno, 1986 and 2007, chapter 2, section 1). Sociological explanation in itself shares the cultural, processual nature of identity building. Sociology for Pizzorno is an infinite process of revealing and mending the tears in the fabric of common sense; it is not simply uncovering what is taken-for-granted in ordinary life, but doing so with the awareness that the taken-for-granted is always in becoming, with contradictions and discrepancies. Through this interpretation we are constructing yet another taken-for-granted for us and for the audience. Thus, Pizzorno writes in *Il velo della diversità* [The Veil of Diversity. Essays on Rationality and Recognition]:

Doing the job of the scholar of the social world one really learns of this: that in any case, under the network that seems to lie down a protection to the familiar, there operate mechanisms which keep it sufficiently robust to overcome this or that surprise or slip, but then they can come into contradiction, logical or existential, with other mechanisms necessary to keep the network steady in other points; and it is therefore our job to be aware that those supports are strong for those who do not insist to think about them, but it is likely that they are strong enough only for a while. Thus, if we continue to reflect upon them, and we continue to investigate, we will often find ourselves in front of other obstacles, and it will be precisely our investigative work that causes other rips (Pizzorno, 2007, pp. 16–17).

Enquiry therefore potentially menaces unquestioned reality, it is a form of identification which as such, contributes to building new theories on the social world to share with an audience, reconstructing and modifying that world. It produces, Pizzorno writes, a "double epoché," in researchers and their audiences. And then a new, at least partially new, re-identification emerges. Theory is thereby understood as a recursive never-ending process of embedded reception, which reflects on social life and impinges on it contributing to its unfolding.

The idea of an ongoing process of recognition, played through socially embedded rhythms of revelation and concealment, brings us back to modern subjectivity. Again, stressing the primacy of reception, Pizzorno (2005, pp. 108–109) closes the essay on the mask by writing that “every gesture or word or grimace” of the modern subject “is a function of a truth to be interpreted.” Furthermore, if the subjects’ actions do not fit the masks attributed to them, it will be necessary to “model other masks” or “rummage in the mask store” (Pizzorno, 2007, p. 94), working on a repertoire of durable references, which will gradually be adjusted and reinterpreted to re-identify the actor and re-establish the social order. The subject that searches and reinterprets does so, quite often, in the name of authenticity, careful to preserve its own coherence imagining a “future I” that survives its contingent choices (p. 94, pp. 96 ss.). Indeed, in modern societies, Pizzorno (2005, p. 108) writes, the human being is “mythologized” as a sacred object, but is also incarnated and “on earth,” carrying this contradiction and forced it to dissolve through the visible constitution of a “self-consciousness.” Communication with others will then appear under the guise of self-expression “to support which” internally “the human being will have to construct an ‘identity to himself’,” a biographical continuity that is identifiable as authentic and personal. As Pizzorno suggests in the interview below, this happens through a “process of mythologizing reconstruction, which feeds our self-esteem.”

Here, the metaphor of the mask tells us something important about the construction of biographical identities. As Pizzorno suggests in the interview, personal identity is a function of a process of negotiation with the many masks which the subject has been attributed and has performed during his life. It is “an autobiography that we try to write about ourselves, in order to have a hidden weapon, whenever we meet others so that we can escape the consequences of their judgement on the esteem we have of ourselves.” And in this multiplicity of recognitions the self finds a possibility of emergence beyond the situation, opening again a never-ending process of adjustment in what Pizzorno (2007) has called the “circles of recognition.”

The individual indeed witnesses the masks growing and becoming entrenched in interaction. And so, as the years go by, each individual will find themselves negotiating with their own collection of masks, carving out smaller and smaller spaces of movement according to the density and thickness of the recognitions received. However, the network of practice that sustain recognition remains the essence, beyond concealment and revelation, difference and identity. The mask therefore is a metaphor for the entrenched “circles of recognition”; it is always in relation to these circles and their practices, that we can understand social action. Again in *Il velo della diversità*, Pizzorno (2007) uses the example of consumption as communication to explain the “circles of recognition.” We put ourselves in this or that dress not to be like others, nor to be different but to be in a practice that we share with others and within which “people evaluate the actions of others, so together exercising their willingness to evaluate their own” (p. 147). Reception, or embedded recognition, with its ongoing play of revelation and concealment adumbrated by the mask, is thus to be interrogated for those who want to understand in a Pizzornian way identity and society.

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