"Identity and Pluralism: Who Am I? What Are We? How Are We?" – A Reflection on Seeking, Giving and Making Sense of Organising in a Fluid, Uncertain and Digitised World

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The word '**id**entity' is stemmed from the root *-id* (*-ῐδ*), the verbal form of the ancient Greek *eidon* (*ε-ῐ̓δ-ον*), aorist of the verb *orao* (i.e., 'to see' - *ὁράω*), that in Latin is *vĭdēre*. Therefore '*id*' firstly affects with the ability to know, but also with the ability to recognise anyone is 'other' than the individuals. In psychoanalysis, for example, '*id*' corresponds to '*Es*', accordingly with the three Freud's instances in which the psychic apparatus is split; and, in organisational terms, 'id' recognises who and what is 'other' than 'us'. Furthermore, today, in the contemporary common sense, every morning we open our laptop and we use the concept of ID, as an identification code that each of us uses for most of the daily relationships that take place throughout the internet.

Pluralism may be considered as a challenge that demands organisations to cope with demanding institutions and stakeholders (Kraatz and Block, 2008). On the other hand, pluralism could be a methodological opportunity for organisations, thus becoming more flexible in managing different entities embodied in the organisational structure (Hainze and

Weber, 2016). Accordingly, this tension between entities and ways of organising, claims which part of these entities remains always the same, making the organisation recognisable, namely the *id*-entity (Albert and Whetten, 1985).

Organisation theory and practice are progressively challenged and enriched by conflicting expectations expressed by a plethora of stakeholders whose answers have often to be found by the embrace of academic multi-disciplinarity – i.e. the borrowing of constructs and models from other fields. In this fluid reality, organisations tend to be more problematic to *design*, but also to be implemented in organisational practices, according to a constant dialectic between two polarities: Organisational design and Organisation behaviour, in that constant dialectical tension that gives back the measure of the complexity and sense-making of organisational action. These are extremely significant polarities and privileged points of observation and interpretation of organisational phenomena, as well as a starting point for understanding how to put organisational action into practice.

In this sense, business organisations (and academic research in the organisational field) are like 'convenient microcosms' where scholars and managers can observe the emergence of the unexpected, the craft of the new, the unfolding of new practices and meanings. By anchoring the idea of organisation (and organisation) and the seminal intuition of Chester Barnard (1938) on the 'fabrics of social life', the concepts of identity and pluralism are put to the test, since reality questions what we know.

These two concepts have therefore stimulated the debate between different actors in the field of Organisation studies, on many occasions of international academic debate: think of the Workshop of Business Organisation (i.e., *Workshop di Organizzazione Aziendale* – WOA), which celebrated its first twenty years, on the occasion of the edition held in Palermo in 2019. On that occasion, not by chance, a call for proposals (launched by a scientific committee of 'new young old scholars', present since the first edition of the WOA) stimulated several authors to contribute to this issue focused on the roots, the identity and the pluralism of our theoretical-disciplinary statute, and was born from the partnership between puntOorg International Research Network[1] and ASSIOA[2] (the scientific society of Italian scholars of organisation that promotes the WOA), starting from the awarding of a puntOorg/Assioa prize, for the best paper.

Looking at the concept of organisational identity, this is a multifaced concept, up to the point where organisational identity is linked almost to everything (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008). Furthermore, the concept of identity evolves from a structural perspective (Albert and Whetten, 1985) to a constructivist one (Ashfort and Mael, 1989). The first perspective inquires the permanence of those elements strictly linked to the organisational identity and the second one the construction of social identity, where elements of the individual identity interact with the organisation, and vice versa. Albert and Whetten (1985) can be considered as the pioneers of this classical approach. They were the first scholars to use the term 'organisational identity' to identify those elements that remain stable, substantial and distinctive over the time. From this point of view, the organisational identity becomes more visible and acknowledgeable during periods of crisis, in that precise moment when people are forced to question which elements are stable and which not. Gioia *et al*. (2000) expand on Albert and Whetten's (1985)

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[1] Further information can be found online at https://www.puntoorg.net/en/ (last accessed: May 5, 2020).

[2] Further information can be found online at http://www.assioa.it/ (last accessed: May 5, 2020).

elements of stability and distinctiveness over the time in organisational identity by adding that, while an organisation might not be considered stable over the time, it nevertheless preserves some of its features, thus conveying a certain halo of stability. Thus, according to Gioia et al., what it changes is the meanings associated with those labels that represent the stable elements of the organisational identity. In order words, while individuals perceive organisations as stable, they are always at the mercy of change as the meanings associated with those labels change. This process is called "adaptive instability" (Gioia *et al.*, 2000, p. 63). Identity is not only an individual issue but a collective one. It is strictly correlated with the interaction among individuals and the interaction between individuals and the organisation in the wider social context. Likewise, the organisation's identity is of significance for all the individuals belonging to that organisation and, correspondingly, individuals' identity is of paramount significance for the organisation. Conversely, the constructivist approach assumes that the social context is a lever for the shaping of identity. Indeed, pluralism pulls identity through multi-disciplinarity – i.e., the borrowing of constructs and models from other fields. In this fluid reality, organisations tend to be more problematic to *design* while extremely meaningful as privileged points of observations of phenomena. In this vein, they result as 'convenient microcosms' where scholars and managers can observe the emergence of the unexpected, the craft of the new, the unfolding of novel practices and meanings. Moving from the philosophical roots of the *ego consciousness*, studies on pluralism and organisational identity have variously addressed what is believed to be foundational, valid, central and meaningful by organisational members, however the organisational boundaries would have been defined. Such studies have spanned from the questioning of the individual fit with the organisational values and culture, to value-based and cognitive-enacted links gluing entire dispersed communities, passing though teams and more traditional forms of organising (associations, companies, etc.). In this heterogeneous and magmatic manifestation of the 'real', individuals and organisations of various kind, nature and size struggle with the definition of their identities (sense-giving), the result of the individual and collective creation of meaning (respectively, perceptions/projections *vs.* sense-making/sense-breaking), the processes through which they try to survive juggling with different affordances of pluralism and identity. Societal values are changing the habits and patterns of consumption and the use of resources. Many other challenges are waiting for us to consider them in our theorising and researching.

In this vein, the articles published in this issue go through the concepts of identity and pluralism, proposing novel and insightful thinking both from theoretical and empirical perspectives. The article proposed by Patrick Agbedejobi adopts critical discourse analysis to understand in what extent the religious discourse shapes and control the identity of Gay Muslims in Germany. According to this, Critical Discourse Analysis remains an underestimated methodology for organisations scholars, despite the main author known as the founder of this methodology, Norman Fairclough, has published in 2005 an article on Organisation Studies explaining why organisations need to deepen the analysis of discourse in their research, instead of marginalising it as an "extreme version of social constructivism" (Fairclough, 2005: 919). Identity as a construction has been also inquired by Roberta Sferrazzo, who proposes an interesting perspective on workers' identity with her study on liminal spaces. Originally meant as either a rite of passage or the feeling of being in *betweenness* by Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1969), The concept of liminality it is adopted as a lens to build workers' identity in contemporary world. In this realm, identity is not only shaped by

what is done, but even by where is done. Spaces may contribute to build identity of people in the same extent in which contribute the build organisational identity. Looking at the article proposed by Roberta, the liminal perspective represents a certain *otherness* of spaces, i.e. workers are not inquired in the spaces they live and work but rather in spaces where they transit during the day. The paper written by Teresa Anna Rita Gentile, Ernesto De Nito, Rocco Reina, Anna Maria Melina looks at the identity of higher education, and consequently the one of scholars, through the academic courses offered via web platforms. Moving from the interest in e-learning, that has been mainly focused on the efficacy and the adoption of the platforms used, they address the matter of e-learning design. Online tools can cover part or all of the courses where technology mediates the learning process, and which aims to increase an integrated training environment. Furthermore, the adoption of e-learning in universities enables the transfer of learning materials through the use of specially designed online tools. The paper published by Luca Pareschi addresses European identity and the way in which it is spelled out by European Union. A sample of publications of the Publication Office labelled with 'European Identity' has been analysed through Topic Modelling, eliciting six topics that constitute those documents, which deals with laws in relation to national and European identities, the process of political integration, common history, education and shared values, nationalism and the conflicts of the previous century, and borders and minorities. The implicit pluralism in symbols, news, and values are not acting *per se*, but they need to be discussed in relation to the identity shaped by the public debate, consequently to a process of discourse legitimisation. Domenico Berdicchia and Fulvio Fortezza address the theme of coworking as a recent phenomenon, as a way for different workers, mostly freelancers or start-uppers, to share workspaces. However, the existence of coworking centres are turning the concept of co-working in some more interesting, contributing to construct a collective identity in accordance to a plural commitment to their own professional tasks, collaborating with each other within a space that is shared not only to decrease fixed costs, but rather to evolve into coworking 'organisations'.

The full paper collected in this issue (as the result of a very rigorous and careful double blind review process) therefore cover the entire historical span of some fundamental issues in the evolution of business organisation studies, from its origins to the present day, thus testifying to the fervour of the academic community of our academic community, those of business organisation studies. And, at the same time, this issue of the *puntOorg International Journal* is a milestone of how a Scientific Journal In the field of Economics and Social Science can contribute to witness how rich the variety of a debate still ongoing is, ultimately celebrating the intentions of the XX WOA and the successful partnership with *puntOorg*.

Keywords

Organizational identity; liminality; Critical discourse analysis; topic modelling

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