Cultural narrative identities and the entanglement of value systems

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Luis Emilio Bruni

Abstract

This chapter explores the nature and the implications of the processes of reflective construction of "cultural-selves" and "collective consciousness" mediated by the narrative function. In particular, it brings together the notions of "narrative identity" and "heterarchy of values" in order to synthesize a relational, processual and heterarchical notion of *cultural narrative identity*. For this purpose, it highlights the centrality of "values" in the determination of identities. Values may be spread throughout a web of emerging intertwined spheres and domains, encompassing inseparably the individual, the social and the cultural; in domains that go from private to public, from family to work, from local to national to regional to global, touching the many nuances of interest groups and stakeholders co-existing in a globalized civil society. Therefore the processes of identification very often confront individuals and whole cultural layers with non-transitive value scales that give place to *dynamic systems of heterarchical belonging*. The aim is to explore whether such a processual heterarchical perspective can be of utility in understanding the paradoxes and contradictions in contemporary cultural dynamics in light of the acceleration propelled by the global platform of digital technology. The approach considers *heterarchies* as the loci of competing and coexisting value systems and multiple "regimes of worth". Once we have the consideration of value-adherence in multilayer cultural processes and networks, we are bound to consider heterarchical processuality in order to be able to elucidate the rationality of the putative paradoxes and contradictions.

Keywords: cultural narrative identity, heterarchy of values, heterarchical processuality, globalization, value systems, heterarchical belonging, digital technology.

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1 Introduction

If you read carefully the title of this article, you will probably agree with me that it invites a lot of trouble. Every single key term (and their permutations) is problematic and practically constitutes a field of study on its own. It is hard to find consensus about the definition of the terms: "Culture", "Identity", "Values" and "Narrative". There are books, articles, handbooks and tons of materials trying to define these terms and review their respective histories. An additional problem is the fact that these four terms are very intuitive for us and we all have our own definitions and understanding of them.

In my attempt to bring them together, I will put into relation and intersect several established areas of research that perhaps have not been sufficiently in conversation. I will draw inspiration and knowledge from research areas such as identity studies, narrative identity, cultural identity, cognitive and cultural semiotics, and even systems theory and cybernetics. However, I would also like to invite the reader to hold as much as possible to our collective intuitive understanding of these terms, and concentrate rather on their possible interplay. This means that my strategy will be to introduce some selective aspects of these fields and terms, which are instrumental to my argument for the pertinence of synthesizing a notion of "cultural narrative identity" that entails a processual and *heterarchical* perspective, which, I claim, may be useful to tackle contemporary global cultural phenomena.

2 Short on identity

The intrinsic relations between being, unity and identity have been central in the history of ontology and philosophy. The concept of *identity* has been in many different ways considered constitutive for the definition of a being or the delimitation of a unity. The debate ranges from positions that request clear identity criteria for discriminating among existences, to positions that reject the possibility that identity – as a constitutive feature of a being – cannot be defined in an absolute and general sense, or as many seem to fear, in any "essentialist" way. Nevertheless, whether ontologically grounded or epistemologically instrumental, for practical and analytical purposes, some sort of essentialism seems to be inherent (i.e.: essential!) to human cognition. My interest here is not so much on the third person ascription of identity to "things" by an observer (i.e. a categorization or taxonomic endeavor), but rather the kinds of first person reflective, recursive and processual formation of identities, which include personal (or individual) identity, and, more specifically, cultural identity.

In their introduction to the Handbook of Identity Theory and Research, Vignoles, Schwartz and Seth (2011) list some pertinent questions that "have plagued" the literature on identity: "(1) Is identity viewed primarily as a personal, relational, or collective phenomenon? (2) Is identity viewed as relatively stable, or as fluid and constantly changing? (3) Is identity viewed as discovered, personally constructed, or socially constructed?" These questions will help us to think about the relational, processual and heterarchical nature of what we are calling *cultural narrative identity*. In their extensive review, and throughout the whole volume, Vignoles, Schwartz and Seth (2011) show the diversity and the "power" of the identity construct in a myriad of academic disciplines and fields such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, political science, education, family studies, and public health, from different traditions, methodologies and focal levels of analysis. They conclude that on a fundamental level, identity involves people's explicit or implicit responses to the question: "Who are you?" As we will see, very often the answer to that question will take the form of a story.

3 Narrative identity

According to Ricoeur (1991: 73), narrative identity fundamentally refers to "the sort of identity to which a human being has access thanks to the mediation of the narrative function". For him, this can be the "life stories" of an individual or of a historical community. If knowledge of the self is an interpretation, this interpretation finds in the narrative mode a privileged mediation. The story that is constructed has to make sense of what it has been, what it is, and what it is desired or expected that it will be of that identity, its

continuity and its permanence in time. At the same time, the story has a protagonist, the self, who brings agency into the picture.

Ricoeur searches for the overlapping zone of two "modes" (or connotations) of the notion of identity: identity as "sameness" (idem), and identity as "self" (ipse). These two modes refer respectively to the "what" and the "who" of the identified unity. "Sameness" can be related to permanence in time – physical and psychological continuity – while "self" can be related to agency. Narrative brings both notions together into what McIntyre (1984: 282) calls the "the narrative structure and unity of a human life" (Ricoeur, 1991). Personal identity as a human reflective process has been conflated with consciousness and memory, via the relation, and the continuity, between past and present. It is this temporal dimension of individual or cultural identity that makes the case for its narrative conception.

There are many psychological descriptions of what happens when identities dissipate: role-confusion, depersonalization, estrangement – the experience of not belonging to one's own psychic events, divorce and alienation from one's own internal psyche, one's own body, one's own external world, as if the natural relation of the self with these three sites is fractured. In this context, is culture to be considered part of the external world? Or, are we to say with Lotman (1990: 223) "We are within [culture], but it – all of it – is within us"? We can say therefore that cultural identity is an intrinsic aspect of personal identity, and this relation leads us to point out one of the key correlates of identity: *the sense of belonging*. The reflective processual identity that we will be referring to is not about being, but about becoming and belonging. Our becoming constantly questions our belonging.

After the seminal works on the topic of narrative identity in the late 1980's and early 1990's in different disciplines (e.g.: philosophy, Ricoeur, 1984, 1991; psychology, McAdams, 1988, 1996; social sciences, Sommers, 1992, 1994), narrative identity became an interdisciplinary field with deep roots in psychology, therefore exploring mostly the level of individual narrative identity, with very little having said about the cultural or social levels (Sommers being an exception). Thus, at the level of the individual,

> … narrative identity is an internalized and evolving story of the self that provides a person's life with some semblance of unity, purpose, and meaning. Complete with setting, scenes, characters, plots, and themes, narrative identity combines a person's reconstruction of his or her personal past with an imagined future in order to provide a subjective historical account of one's own development, an instrumental explanation of a person's most important commitments in the realms of work and love, and a moral justification of who a person was, is, and will be (McAdams, 2011: 100).

Thus according to McAdams' review, over the past 30 years the concept has evolved in many different directions, encompassing perspectives from cognitive science, life-course developmental studies, cultural psychology, sociology, and personality and social psychology, having become a central component of a "full, multi-level theory of personality" (McAdams, 2011).

It can thus be argued that the construction of narrative identities has become a multidimensional and multilayer phenomenon which spans through a web of emerging intertwined spheres and domains, encompassing inseparably the individual, the social and the cultural; in domains that go from private to

public, from family to work, from local to national to regional to global, touching the many nuances of interest groups and stakeholders co-existing heterarchically in a globalized civil society.

4 The cultures of culture

Even more extensive and problematic is the very notion of "culture" and the different perspectives and disciplines that study it. This is worsen by the fact that the term "culture" has been, and still is, a central weapon in intellectual political debates in senses that tend to portray culture, and/or its definitions, as ideological constructs. Another complication is the overlapping of the term culture with "sister" terms such as "society", "civilization", "tradition", and even "nation".[1]

Etymologically the term tradition stems from the Latin "traditionem" (trans = over + dare = give), which signifies delivery, surrender, a handing over, as in the Augustinian sense "…what they had received from the Fathers, this they delivered to the children"(Saint Augustine, 430 [1957]). Therefore in the modern sense, tradition refers to "things" handed down from generation to generation, which is always implicit in the notion of culture. In Raymond Williams's terms "Whatever holds 'significance' from the 'set of meanings' received from 'the tradition' has to be valued in terms of the present experience. For this we have to return them to immediate experience." (Williams, 1960; Shashidhar, 1997). According to Shashidhar (1997), what Williams attempts to show is that any hope of understanding human-social reality lies in coherently relating the significant statements received from the past instances of that "lived" reality to the "immediate" living of our present. In other words, Williams sees such social reality as a hermeneutic dialectic between the past and the present: "Somewhere, in the world of human thinking coming down to us from our predecessors, the necessary insights, the fruitful bearings, exist. But to keep them where they belong, in direct touch with our experience, is a constant struggle" (Williams, 1960; Shashidhar, 1997). Thus, our sense of belonging to a culture, a nation or a tradition is intrinsically related to how we experience it temporally, i.e.: the interplay of our memories and our projections into the future, or, in narrative terms, our continuous existential synthesis of analepsis and prolepsis.

The etymological origin of the term culture as "the tilling of land" relates it to the notion of "civilization" as the passage from nomadic to sedentary modes of life: "Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground". It is with the emergence of the positivist academic disciplines that culture becomes "the intellectual side of civilization", until it ends up almost as a synonym with civilization: societies mutate through successive states of cultural or civilization *progress* in terms of knowledge, beliefs, art, morality, law, costumes, etc. However, the terms "civilization" and "progress" came about only in the XVIII century with the economists prior to the French Revolution, such as Turgot and Littré, and entered the

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[1] Throughout this chapter, the reader may find problematic an apparent interchangeability of the notions of society and culture, or of social and cultural. We are by no means claiming that they are synonyms, but they are certainly mutually constitutive. There is no (human) society without culture and the there is no culture without social life. A culture may be spread in many societies, and a society may contain several cultures. This is an additional reason for pursuing a heterarchical approach to socio-cultural processes. However, I believe there is a fundamental asymmetry between the two categories. There can be social relations, but not cultural processes, without symbolic representation. Therefore I consider culture as a more human-specific and encompassing category than sociality (I say sociality here because for some "society" may be a structure of sociality exclusive of human beings). Based on this closeness between the social and the cultural, the approach advance here will be drawing inspiration and making extrapolations from both social and cultural theories, and this is what may give sometimes an impression of interchangeability, which I hope can be tolerated by the reader.

modern dictionaries as late as 1835, under the influence of the "new ideas" of the XIX century: scientific discoveries, industrial revolution, trade, "well-being", "the age of prosperity" "indefinite progress" and the age of the "absolute civilization" (Guenon, 1982 [1945]). According to Guenon, with the advent of positivism, civilization became the degree of development and perfectionism reached by the European nations in the XIX century. In that period (in 1871), Edward Tylor initiates the Modern technical definition of culture as socially patterned human thought and behavior. In 1917, Alfred Kroeber (1917), a foundational figure of cultural anthropology, made a somehow forgotten seminal contribution, emphasizing the cross-generational aspects of culture beyond its individual human carriers (the "culture bearers"). Individuals are born into and are shaped by a preexisting culture that continues to exist after they die. In this sense, Kroeber's work can be considered an antecedent to Yuri Lotman's semiotic conception of the "cultural space" (Lotman, 1992). With the advent of cultural psychology comes the emphasis of culture as the production and spread of explicit representations, socially shared information that is symbolically coded, which in contemporary global society encompasses a complex merging of mass, pop and digital culture. From this complexity emerge new criteria and kinds of identity, as for example what Haug (1987) calls "commodities' identity", imaginary spaces in which individual consumers construct their own identity by comparing it with a generalized "other", where advertising is a form of "para-ideology" not on the same level of other customary cultural identifying entities such as the state, law or religion, which he claims are proper ideological powers.

The last notion that I that think worth of qualifying in this context is the notion of "nation", as it seems to have had a much stronger impact on the sense of belonging to historical collectives of people than other identity markers (such as country or civilization). The French philologist and historian Ernest Renam delivered a conference at the Sorbonne in 1882 (Renam, 1996 [1882]) with the title "What is a Nation", which provides and insightful and visionary account of the complex problem of overlapping values and identities, which emphasizes the gluing effect of the temporal experience of "having gone together through many things", in other words, what we could consider the raw material of a narrative.

Basically, Renam sees the notion of nation as a deeply-felt identity level laying above race, language, ethnicity, religion, community of interest, geography or military necessities, and therefore much above country and perhaps even culture: the essence of a nation is "that all its individuals must have many things in common but it must also have forgotten many things." He recognized very early that if racial criteria for identity should become predominant, this could lead to the destruction of European civilization, which was close to happen in the first half of the 20th century. He exemplifies how the intimate alliance between the Roman Empire and Christianity delivered a severe blow to the idea of race, excluding for centuries ethnographic criteria for the formation of identities. He supported this by pointing out how the genetic origins of humanity are tremendously anterior to the origins of culture, civilization, and language and how the primitive Aryan, Semitic, and Touranian groups had no physiological unity. According to Renam, historians – as opposed to anthropologist – understand race as a cultural construct. Therefore, shared things like reason, justice, truth, and beauty constitute more valid criteria for placing oneself within a narrative identity – things with which "those who belong" can agree upon. In other words it is values, cultural values, which more properly define narrative identities. A similar reasoning comes with language as a criterion: "Languages are historical formations, which tell us very little about the race of those who speak them" and the political importance that one attaches to languages comes from the fact that, in the past, they have been erroneously regarded as indicators of race.

With religion the issue is more complex because traditionally religion has been a transnational connector of identities, but according to Renam, with the secularization of the State – there where it has taken place – religion has become a matter of individual conscience and there are no longer single masses of people believing in a uniform faith, and whereas it is certainly a very powerful identity trait, it can no longer be considered a trait that determines the identity of (secularized) nations. "Community of interest" as an identity marker can be exemplified today with the advent of the European Union, something that Renam actually predicted. The challenge that the EU faces today is how to include the "European sentiment" in what would otherwise just be a geographically determined commercial treaty with a military alliance. Geography would be the substratum, but a "nation is a body and soul at the same time". Renam's answer to the question "what is a nation" is all about sharing a narrative identity:

> "A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in *the past*, one in *the present*. One is the possession in common of *a rich legacy of memories*; the other is *present-day consent*, the desire to live together, *the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received* … The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavors, sacrifice, and devotion … A heroic past, great men, glory … this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea. To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more … One loves in proportion to the sacrifices to which one has consented, and in proportion to the ills that one has suffered. One loves the house that one has built and that one has handed down. The Spartan song – 'We are what you were; we will be what you are' — is, in its simplicity, the abridged hymn of every *patrie*." (Renam, 1996 [1882], my italics).

The resulting identity in Renam's account possesses, I would claim, the fundamentals of a narrative leaning to a mythical quest: "How many trials still await you! May the spirit of wisdom guide you, in order to preserve you from the countless dangers with which your path is strewn!" (Renam, 1882). Narrative identity integrates agency with foresight and hindsight at the cultural level – the individual sees him/herself in relation to the future trajectories of others and is already under the influence of the past trajectories of others. In turn, this sense of belonging feeds back to the implicit or explicit, definition of multi-agency goals, and it relates to Renam's notion of Nation as "having done and willing to do more".

5 Values in culture

There is a well-accepted mutual constituency between a culture and its individual agents and interpreters. There is a static aspect of a culture, which lays in its foundation, its origins, that which has to be handed over – Ricoeur's "identity as sameness" (idem), the permanence in time (continuity). The dynamic aspect yields development and transformation, the adapting legacy – Ricoeur's "identity as self" (ipse), which brings agency into the picture. This processual changing/permanence dialectic constitutes the narrative identity of a culture and determines the heterarchical belonging of its individuals (see below). To the old proverb that says "know where you come from to know where you are going" we could add "in order to understand where you stand right now". In cultural narrative temporal terms, this can be framed as the dialectics between the roots where you come from (idem) and the values where you stand right now (ipse). "Values" become a defining element of identity but not in a static manner. Values have been considered a powerful kind of cultural "markers" or identifiers", however blurred at times by rigid, categorical and static considerations of value sets and systems, which approach the individual as a coherent

whole subject belonging to a fix collection of such various cultural identifiers. The list of identifiers is long and diverse according to different disciplines, methodologies or frameworks. It is out of the scope of this chapter to review such methodologies and categories, but it is worth to mention some common categories such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, history, nationality, language, religion, aesthetics, food, geography, political orientations, social class, etc. As a reaction to the fixed and static sets of identifiers, which perhaps could make a bit more sense in the pre-globalization societies, people working from the social and/or the business disciplines have suggested that an individual's social identity works more as an amalgamation of cultures across boundaries (national, organizational, professional, etc.), which fuse together to create one's overall culture. The combination would be unique to each individual (Straub et.al. 2002: 14). If this was wholly true, then there would not really be a phenomenon that we can call culture. Everything would be atomized into millions of individual cultures and their social relations. In the direction of Kroeber (1917) and Lotman (1990), which see culture as an emergent phenomena, these atomistic view of individual identities would be difficult to accommodate and a balance would be needed. A heterarchical perspective of cultural narrative identity could aid in finding such balance of dynamic categories of "shared values" that characterize culture. However, "value" is another problematic concept. The issue of "values" has been often considered in research on how to "measure" culture, where in turn the definition of culture risks becoming highly problematic by overly simplistic categorizations. In the 1980s and 1990s, the "shared values" perspective was advanced by numerous researchers (Straub et. al. 2002). With his peculiar definition of culture as a collective programming of the mind, Hofstede (1984: 18) sees values as "a broad tendency to prefer certain states of affairs over others". Once a value is learned, it becomes integrated into an organized system of values where each value has a relative priority, and therefore one could eventually hierarchize them. Such a value system would be relatively stable in nature but can change over time, reflecting changes in culture as well as in personal experience. Cultural patterns are rooted in value systems of major groups of the population and they get stabilized over long periods of history. Therefore, individuals based on their unique experiences not only differ in their value systems but also in the relative stability of these value systems (Straub et. al., 2002).

Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1994) emphasize the temporal dimension when they claim that members of a culture are likely to share common attitudes because they share a common history. They present a scheme of seven dimensions of culture that classify such attitudes in binary oppositions: 1) universalism/particularism, 2) individualism/collectivism, 3) neutral/affective relationships, 4) specific/diffuse relationships, 5) achievement/ascription, 6) internal/external control, and 7) perspectives on time. There are in the literature several of these "universal" schemes of categorizations based on values and/or attitudes. My interest is not how these schemes are specifically defined, but rather how the different idiosyncratic instantiations of the different categories interact dynamically in cultural processes, so eventually any scheme could potentially work in a particular domain. What many of these value-based descriptions of culture have in common is the notion of boundary e.g., the nation-state/geographic borders, organization, or profession, or the boundaries of the semiosphere in question. For example, Straub et al. (2002) make the binary distinction between core and peripheral values. Culture is primarily a manifestation of core values which influence individuals' cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors.

Many of these descriptions tend to a have a nomothetic view of culture abstracting from the particular historical idiographic instantiations of lived culture as a product of history – and thereby my insistence on the identity that results from the narrative function. The nomothetic or ahistorical

perspective I call the "operative system" perspective, which sees culture as a mindset or framework in which individuals and societies interact. To this, sometimes it can be added what those individuals and societies have achieved with the given "operative system" – which perhaps brings the idiographic perspective into play. This distinction can be found in both Lotman's semiosphere and Ricouer' s narrative model. Straub et al. (2002) classified the multiplicity of definitions of culture into three main groups: definitions based on shared values; definitions based on problem solving; and a third group that they call "general all-encompassing definitions". However, when these definitions do not conform exclusively to the "operative system" perspective, and take the historical uniqueness into consideration, there is a tendency to portray a geographic perspective of culture. For example, Hofstede's (1984) offers a mechanism whereby a culture value can be assigned to a particular group of people. This group is determined by a geographical boundary. Given the dynamism of historical World migration this can be very problematic, even in the pre-globalization and pre-digital era, as illustrated by Renam's account.

6 Towards a heterarchical approach

Recent understandings of narrative identity suggest that a person's life story says as much about the culture wherein a person's life finds its constituent meanings as it does about the person's life itself. In constructing self-defining life stories, people draw heavily on prevailing cultural norms and the images, metaphors, and themes that run through the many narratives they encounter in social life (McAdams, 2011). This cultural perspective still has the main focus on the individual, where culture is "just" an influence or a constraint in the development of individual narratives. On the other hand, Somers (1994) pioneered the study of identity formation through the concept of narrative regarding the "social construction of identity". Her approach to narrative identity helps to circumvent the common anti-essentialist prejudices towards any use of the notion of identity. It also seeks to avoid the hazards of misleading categorical conceptions of identity, and it makes a dynamic linkage between identity and agency. However, the main importance of her contribution, in the present context, lies in her "relational and network approach", which supports the perspective of a processual understanding of narrative identity as *a dynamic system of heterarchical belongings*, which I am proposing here. By the time of the publication of her article, the "narrative turn" in different disciplines of the humanities, social and human sciences (including anthropology, psychology and cognitive sciences) was yielding a new ontological status to narrative phenomena that transcended the customary epistemological status, which limited narrative to be a sort of qualitative method or simply a form for representation. Somers saw in this turn an opportunity "to infuse the study of identity formation with a relational and historical approach that avoids categorical rigidities by emphasizing *the embeddedness of identity in overlapping networks of relations that shift over time and space.*" (Somers, 1994: 607 my italics). This was in light of the challenges that social theory was confronting at the time, which included among others the collapse of communist regimes, the ecological crisis, the conflicts of ethnic solidarities, cultural nationalisms, a vast array of "new social movements" such as the green movements, gay and lesbian movements, feminism and multiculturalism. These challenges remain actual today while others have gained a renewed prominence, such as religious conflicts, the blurring and the exacerbation of the left/right political dichotomies, neo-populist ideologies (left and right), the political reduction of the ecological crisis to climatic change, the advancement of globalization, technological utopianism, cultural homogenization and global branding, among others. These issues and challenges today acquire a new level of complexity in light of the cultural acceleration that is propelled by the global platform of digital technology.

According to Somers, in the 1990's, the emerging social theories of "identity-politics", had shifted explanations for action from "interests" and "norms", to "identities" and solidarities", assuming that people act on the grounds of common or shared attributes (or cultural markers) rather than on rational interest or a set of fixed learned values. In this context, Somers lucidly warned about emerging identity-categories that may end up working as new "totalizing fictions" in which a single category of experience will dominate over a set of cross-cutting simultaneous differences (for example, gender and sexual identity overruling class, ethnicity, race, age, religion, etc.). According to her, "the new identity-theories reify anew what is in fact a multiplicity of historically varying form of what are less often unified and singular and more often "fractured identities''. Therefore, she claimed, there is a need for a new conceptual vocabulary that can enable us to plot the narrative identities which dynamically shape history and social action synchronically and diachronically. As I will try to show, a heterarchical perspective may contribute to advance in this direction by explaining how "solidarities" can overlap in seemingly contradictory non-transitive permutations of shared attributes in the cultural dynamics of the semiosphere. Social and cultural action can be better understood if we can recognize the various culturally constructed stories in which people are *emplotted* and which according to Somers consist of composed of (breakable) rules, (variable) practices, binding (and unbinding) institutions, and the multiple plots of family, nation, economic life, etc. – all of which conforms, in the view of the present work, a heterarchical entanglement of values, traits, attributes and interests in such narratives identities.

At this point it is pertinent to be more precise about the notion of heterarchy and specifically about its inherent characteristic of allowing to organize subjective values (expressed from a particular standpoint), which by being subjective do not conform to the laws of transitivity. Although Warren McCulloch (1945) introduced the notion of "heterarchy" into science more than 70 years ago, its implications and epistemological consequences have not been widespread in the scientific and academic main stream (von Goldammer, Joachim and Newbury, 2003; Bruni and Giorgi, 2015). A heterarchy is not defined in opposition to a hierarchy, but rather in a relation of complementarity. One crucial difference between both organizational principles is that hierarchies can be found in both physical and living systems, while heterarchies are to be found exclusively in the living world – where subjective, semiotic and communication processes take place. Hierarchies may be fixed and static, whereas heterarchies are by necessity processual and dynamic. Therefore, it would perhaps be more correct to speak about heterarchical processuality (Bruni and Giorgi, 2015).

What McCulloch (1945) realized at the neural level (a living system), is that it is not always possible for the system to rank (hierarchically) its values with respect to the available choices. Physical processes don't deal with options or choices. Only living organisms that can sense differences act upon response-repertoires that involve two or more potential options, determining different degrees of proto-subjectivity and subjectivity in living systems (Bruni and Giorgi, 2015). This is of course much more evident at the level of human subjective values. According to von Goldammer, Joachim and Newbury (2003: 2), it is precisely the process of decision itself that has to be analyzed in order to understand from a logical point of view what distinguishes a "heterarchy of values" from a kind of ranking that implies a "hierarchy of values". At whatever level of the scale of semiotic freedom in living systems, in which choices – based on assessments of the context – are enacted by the system, there is the possibility of a value anomaly between the options of the repertoire. This means that the options are not necessarily ranked hierarchically, and therefore the transitivity law is not valid. In a value system (or scale) the transitivity law

would take the following form: "if A is preferred to B and B to C that means that A is preferred to C". In a physical value system – like for instance a measurement scale – transitive logical statements can always be constructed for the physical attributes and measurable physical quantities that it expresses. For example if A is taller than B, and B is taller than C, A will *always* result to be taller than C. Therefore, the three values can be ranked hierarchically from taller to lowest. On the other hand, when there is a system expressing subjective values, the values or preferences not always can be ranked in this way. If a person prefers coffee to hot chocolate, and hot chocolate to tea, that does not necessarily mean that the person prefers coffee to tea: the values are, in this sense, intransitive. Let me illustrate this point with an example from computer science. Suppose that we have a system for managing a database of books. A transitive dependency occurs only if our database relates three or more attributes. Let us say that in our case we have three distinct collections of attributes: Book (A), Author (B), and Author-Nationality (C). In these collection, the following conditions hold:

I.   A → B, if we know the book we know the author (it is not the case that B → A, knowing the author does not guarantee us knowing which book).
II.   B → C, if we know the author we know the author-nationality
III.   Then the functional dependency A → C follows, if we know the book we know the author-nationality by the axiom of transitivity.

However, in a relational database there is not only one-to one and one-to-many relationships (like e.g. one author having only one nationality, or one author having many books) – which may yield a hierarchical model by virtue of the transitive dependency – but there can also be many-to-many relationships (suppose that a book could have many different authors and that an author can have many different nationalities, which is actually possible). This situation would require a network-like model able to exclude certain types of transitive dependencies in order to navigate the referential system. Otherwise there could emerge paradoxical loops or value anomalies, which would jeopardize the referential integrity of the database in question. In our case, the referential integrity corresponds to a coherent narrative identity. One of the implications of the transitivity law is that it cannot deal with the possibility of pondering two or more values in simultaneity. This is a very important point to understand heterarchical processuality because, as mentioned before, we need to consider the "process of decision" when "choosing" the value through which we will based our actions or our criteria for belonging. There is a circular cognitive/volitive process here: we processually "define" or choose our values in order to act, and while acting we define and actualized our values. Our options are not presented or compared one after the other, but simultaneously, and our choices between two or more potential acts are very often mutually exclusive. This presents us often with dilemmas and paradoxical or incompatible choices. Moreover, such heterarchies of values can be highly context-dependent and dynamically vary from one situation to the other (which is not possible in rigid hierarchies or categorizations). McCulloch (1945) introduced the notion of "value anomaly" (or "diallel") to refer to these logical contradictions. The term can be related to similar notions such as paradox, tautology, antinomy, contradiction, dissonance, semantic incongruence, and to Bateson's notion of double bind (Bruni and Giorgi, 2015). In normal healthy circumstances, value anomalies and vicious circles are usually resolved by recognizing a wider gestalt that may help to make meaning out of the seemingly irreducible values or criteria for belonging to a given category or collective identity. One can suspect that the condition becomes pathological when, from one or another reason, the individual or the collectivity has no access to a larger gestalt (or narrative) which could potentially put the contradiction

in a new congruent perspective. A paradox of conflicting values may involve problems with self-referentiality, and therefore with identity, which can only be dealt by identifying a meta-narrative that allows inclusion into a larger or overlapping gestalt (outside of the paradoxical situation) in which the subject can alternate between seemingly different standpoints. The parallel and simultaneous logical places of each standpoint have to be mediated by some adequate narrative that will thrive to coherently accommodate the different perspectives and potential scenarios of each of the standpoints in an attempt to reconcile the dialectical contradiction through the synthesis of a new identity. Heterarchies are complex adaptive systems that interweave a multiplicity of organizing principles, becoming "the sites" of competing and coexisting value systems, which allow multiple regimes of worth (Stark, 2001).

According to Somers (1994) choosing narratives to express multiple subjectivities is a way of overcoming the apparent neutrality and objectivity typically embedded in master narratives. She provides the following example: the public narratives of working class community available in certain historical periods may have omitted women, just as many of the current feminist accounts of identity may omit class and poverty. The elaboration of counter-narratives emerges as a natural strategy when one's identity is not expressed in the dominant public ones. In Lotman's terms this would be how new meanings and narratives generated in the peripheries make it to the center of the semiosphere. The new emerging narratives may link particular spheres or domains (e.g. gender, class, nationality, background, etc.) with many other "relational complexities", which reveal "alternative values" in multiple narrative trajectories.

In a relational and heterarchical perspective, identities cannot be exclusively derived from attributes imputed to a specific social category in a particular culture at a given historical period. Rather, cultural narrative identities could be derived from the heterarchical belonging of the given groups of agents to the multiple overlapping narratives (standpoints) in which they are embedded and which they themselves identify with. What the analyst can hope for is to recognize "patterns of overlaps" of such narratives and standpoints.

A good example could be the criteria for belonging to emerging transnational political cultures in the western world, where traditional binary oppositions such as left/right, progressive/conservative, and liberal/socialist have become blurred by a plethora of overlapping values that are giving rise to new contradictions, new identities and hybrid transnational alliances. The different versions of multiculturalism and political correctness may also introduce paradoxes. Policies in these directions may intend to promote equality of opportunity, exchange across social boundaries, tolerance and "diversity" but at the same time may introduce contradictions which may facilitate discrimination or segregation by class, race, and gender (Wade, 2017). The very debate on culturalism and multiculturalism transects political identities across left and right. Stjernfelt and Eriksen (2012) claim that culturalism – the idea that individuals are wholly determined by their culture – brings contradictions across the whole political spectrum.

In line with Ricoeur's notion of semantic innovation (1984), Somers (1994) sees narratives as constellations of relationships (connected parts) embedded in time and space, constituted by causal emplotment, which preclude sense making of singular isolated phenomena. As a cognitive faculty, causal emplotment helps to discern meaning by linking multiple events in temporal and spatial relationships. Such relationships may become confused when it is impossible or illogical to integrate them into an intelligible plot. If the story and its implicit values are not clear, the capacity to act may be hindered, become incongruent or even paradoxical. Prioritizing events, like prioritizing values, entails a process of

hierarchization. For example, a collectivity participating in themes such as "political correctness", "sustainability", "free market", "economic growth" "full employment" and "climate change" will have to relate to concrete examples of events from current social and cultural processes and arrange them in some order, and normatively evaluate these arrangements (Somers, 1994). When there are subjectively competing or contradicting themes in the plot, events and values may not conform to the transitivity property and therefore may lead to paradoxical or unintelligible relations. The selected or predominant themes can only be arrange (or interpreted) heterarchically, and it is their consolidation in a normative frame that can freeze them into a hierarchy that may attempt to smooth contradictions and paradoxes. However, in a different time or context a different set of prevailing narratives could determine a different sense of belonging. If we rigidly place individuals or communities in fixed categories, based on common interests or values, our analysis may become blurred if we fail to consider the processual relationships and life-episodes implied in the narrative identity approach. Thus, an analytical approach should consider this sort of multilayered, processual and relational dynamics where the cultural narrative identities that emerge overlap to give place to complex heterarchical systems of values and, therefore, of belongings.

The importance of these dynamic collective narratives is their mutual constituency with agency. Individuals and collectivities adjust stories to fit their own identities, and, conversely, they will tailor "reality" to fit their stories (Somers, 1994). In other words, identity and reality are mutually constitutive. The proleptic power and the normative aspect of self-fulfillment prophesies is related to this mutual constitution. For the socio-cultural level, Somers uses the term *public narratives*, which are "those narratives attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual" constituting intersubjective networks or institutions (Somers, 1994). Thus, public narratives may range from family levels, workplace, church, province or nation (curiously, Somers does not mention culture as an entity or level to which one can belong to). In this perspective, these collectivities selectively appropriate and arrange events into stories and plots with normative goals, explanatory power and inclusion/exclusion criteria.

7 Heterarchical relational clusters in the Semiosphere

The narrative construction of the cultural "self" can be related to Yuri Lotman's dynamic model of the semiosphere. For Lotman (1990), the primary mechanism of semiotic individuation is the boundary between "two spheres in binary opposition", which differentiates one culture from another, and through which the culture in question divides the world in its own internal and an external space. In this sense, it is such boundary that gives place to a narrative of identity and a sense of belonging. Even though Lotman's system acknowledges the paradoxes of self-reflexivity in culture, it remains a hierarchical system organized in meta-levels, levels, and strata in relations of binary inclusion and exclusion, which do not admit grading but require either-or decisions: "something is either inside or outside, above or below; there is no in-between, nor is there a gradual transition between the two opposites" (Nöth, 2006). According to Nöth (2006) this carries the burden of the heritage of a semiotic structuralism that sought to explain semiosis in terms of oppositions even where gradations and transitions between the opposites prevail. One of Lotman's main asymmetries is the "center/periphery" asymmetry, in which the center would be the locus of stability and identity legitimization, while the periphery would be the locus of instability, creativity, transgression of norms and therefore the locus of blurring, transforming or creation of new identities. Perhaps, the picture today is not that of a static center with coherent sets of cultural values, but rather that

of many centers, and many peripheries with overlapping value systems. These asymmetries, which assign value to one or the other side of the locus, do not necessarily yield value systems or sets of cultural values, which can be ranked hierarchically as in a pyramid or an onion system of concentric circles of inclusion. In Lotman's metaphor of semiotic "space", the geometrical symmetries inherent to physical space (left and right, above and below, far and near, in and out), become asymmetrical loci of cultural values (good or bad, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly). The former (space, etc.) can be organized in scales of values that conform to the transitivity law. The latter, i.e. cultural values, cannot. Nevertheless these asymmetries can still function as complex criteria for inclusion and or belonging, and therefore of identity. Thus, mapping dynamic systems of heterarchical belonging in the semiosphere can help us to account for the overlapping of subjective value systems. Different values from apparently mutually exclusive loci at different hierarchical levels can be grouped or can overlap under one narrative identity in a particular time-space and context. If cultural identities are socially constituted over time-space and through heterarchical networks, then the "other" cultures are constitutive rather than external entities. This can help to overcome dichotomist notions of (cultural) identities derived from Lotman in terms of "in and out", "us/them", "ours/theirs", giving a new meaning to the importance given by Lotman to the notion of "borders" as the most creative and productive zones of the semiosphere. Lotman also stated that cultures are oriented towards a rhetorical organization in which each step in the "increasing hierarchy of semiotic organization" produces an increase in the dimensions of the space of the semantic structure. This "hierarchy", or rather as claimed here, a heterarchy, could encompass the individual, the social and the cultural, going from the private to the public, from family to work, from local to national to regional to global, in many different domains and with multifarious semiotic resources.

According to Somers (1994), in order to make social action intelligible, the systemic typologies of our categorizations must be broken apart and their parts disaggregated and reassembled on the basis of *relational clusters*. Such relational clusters, settings or matrices, configure patterns of (heterarchical) relationships among institutions, public narratives, and social practices from which identity-formation takes shape through contested but patterned relations among narratives, people, and institutions (Somers, 1994). This cultural space of meaning making has a diachronic-synchronic development. Relational settings have history and therefore must be explored through time and space. Somers claims that spatially, "a relational setting must be conceived with a geometric rather than a mechanistic metaphor, because it is composed of a matrix of institutions linked to each other in variable patterns contingent on the interaction of all points in the matrix." (Somers, 1994). This finds a congruent implementation in Lotman's spatial and geometric metaphor of the cultural space. However, as previously mentioned, Lotman's semiosphere model for cultural dynamics have been often understood as implying levels of analysis that can be ranked in terms of their inclusiveness inside each other, postulating therefore cultural levels organized in hierarchical concentric spheres. This makes it difficult to consider the heterarchical crossovers and overlaps of different cultural spheres or layers that we have been referring to. In Somers' perspective, the effects, or attributes, of different relational settings, clusters or matrices, can cross "levels" (of analysis) converging in an experienced social, geographical, cultural and symbolic narrative identity:

> A setting crosses 'levels' of analysis and brings together in one setting the effect of, say, the international market, the state's war-making policies, the local political conflicts among elites, and the community's demographic practices of a community - each of which takes social, geographical, and symbolic narrative expression.

This "cross-cutting" perspective can help us to discern complex criteria for partaking in a particular cultural narrative identity that can eventually correlate to the agency derived by such identity, by assessing how this agency is affected or constituted interactively by complex arrays of attributes coming from different relevant settings, matrices or spheres that relate to each other in a heterarchical network. Following Somers' reasoning, one could empirically disaggregate the attributes of a cluster from any presumed covarying whole, and then reconfigure them in their spatiotemporal (narrative) relationality. Different cultural layers of a "recognized cultural unity" would not be simply cast as variants of a single culture, but as different relational cluster that can overlap between each other and even share attributes with cultural layers from "another" culture. The effect of any one cluster (with its attributes or markers) could only be discerned by assessing how it is affected interactively by other relevant clusters and dimensions.

8 Conclusions

One of Somers' central question was why should we assume that an individual or a collectivity has a particular set of interests (or values) simply because one aspect of their identity fits into a pre-defined category. Furthermore, once we have place them in the given category (e.g., traditional artisan, modern-factory worker, peasant, etc.) – and therefore imputed to them a predefined set of interest or values – we proceed to explain their actions and behaviors. Even if such interests and values are considered to be somehow modulated by cultural, social or existential intervening factors, the analytical endeavor remains placing people in the right categories by identifying in them the putative interests and values of that category (Somers, 1994: 623). This may apply indifferently to social or cultural analysis, or, in fact, to how much cultural dynamics is made to intersect with social action. One may argue that such fixed sets of values in given social or cultural categories perhaps were more or less homogeneous in the past. It is certainly not the case under the current cultural dynamics of a globalized digital society, in which values and interests may transect from one (cultural) category to the other in seemingly conflicting, contradictory or paradoxical ways. Somers' contention was that, epistemologically speaking, a dynamic narrative identity approach would considerably decrease the normative load implicit in the static categorizations resulting from "traditional" theories of identity. Analytically, the resulting identities should be rather considered in the context of complex relational and cultural matrices determined by empirical inquiry and not by a priori assumptions. The issue looks problematic if one considers that it is ontologically impossible to construct an analytical tool completely devoid of normativity. However, we can acknowledge that it is rather a matter of more or less, and therefore we can have as a legitimate normative goal to construct or choose our tools in such a way as to avoid (as much as possible) the kind of fixed categories that oversee the relational and "cultural matrices" in which they operate. Even the different ways of approaching the "cultural matrices", in which the identities live, may have implicit normative considerations. However, it can be a productive goal, if it implies overcoming stereotyping dichotomies (e.g. left/right wing), identity categories (e.g. socialist/capitalist/liberal/religious affiliations/ecologist/feminist, etc.), and static sets of cultural markers (e.g. western/non-western/eastern/aboriginal). Instead of prescribing avenues for agency dictated *a priori* for the given category, dynamic and context-dependent categories would allow us to discern seemingly unintelligible contradictions and paradoxes in cultural and social phenomena. Such unintelligible contradictions and paradoxes may arise in our analysis when:

1) We place an individual or a collectivity in a static cultural (or social, or political) category.

2) The identity and the belonging criteria of the category is defined by a set of values and interest that can be hierarchized (i.e. ranked) in transitive relations of dependency (e.g. if you are a right-winger, you are a conservative, therefore you are …; if you are a left-winger, you are open-minded, therefore you are …).

3) We assume that an individual or a collectivity has a particular set of interests (or values) because one aspect of their identity fits into a given category.

4) We assume that belonging to a given category entails action based on a response-repertoire based on that category.

5) We adopt an interest approach that assumes that people act on the basis of rational means-ends preferences or by internalizing a set of values.

6) We try to make sense of social action by placing people into the right social and cultural categories by identifying their putative interests, and then by looking empirically at variations among those interests in a system of fixed hierarchical categories.

From the narrative identity perspective, people would act or express their loyalties in systems of heterarchically embedded categories such as citizenship, social class, gender, race, tradition, interests, cultural origin, etc. What can bring meaning in such seemingly disparate overlaps is the emplotting of a shared story. Looking for the story will point to the patterns that makes sense of such overlaps. The relational clusters (or settings) overlap in storylines across "levels" of analysis or categories, and the seemingly unintelligible contradictions at any level or domain can be better understood by assessing how the level or domain is affected interactively by the other relevant dimensions.

In the explosive and accelerated cultural processes mediated in the emerging digital semiosphere (Bruni 2014), the phenomenon of "fractured identities" gets an enhanced level of complexity, which diminishes any theoretical dichotomies that attempt to hierarchize forms of differences and shared values, which allegedly would allow the constitution of clear-cut categories, but which in fact may blur our understanding of current global political, social and cultural phenomena, or may give rise to new normative forms of exclusion hindering mutual cultural understanding. In such perspective, the identification of overlapping non-transitive values helps to account for the mingling of social and cultural attributes, which determine complex criteria of mixed belongings. Social roles can find analogies in different cultures and can be assumed similarly or differently in a way in which, for example, social identities can transect heterarchically across different cultures.

In spite of the *apparent* decentralization of media power entailed by the digital revolution, the mainstream (traditional) media is still able to arrange and connect events to create a "mainstream plot" that may dominate history. However, in today's atomization, these dynamics is much more complex and contradictory, including a plethora of new phenomena such as "fake news", "fact-checkers", data dredging, bubble filters, cultural narrowing, massive psychological digital profiling, social bots, etc., which may determine new forms of communicational hegemonies. Therefore, what is included in the levels of personal and public narratives cannot be seen as a hierarchic system of concentric spheres, which has the individual as a kernel surrounded by larger encompassing spheres (e.g.: individual, family, workplace, city, nation, culture). This makes Charles Taylor's term "webs of interlocution" highly relevant: intersubjective webs of relationality, which sustain and transform narratives over time (Taylor 1989, Somers, 1994). Identity can be then seen as adherence to certain shared community values (the good, the saved, the believers, the just, the tolerant), which can only make sense in such "webs of interlocution". This stresses

the importance of values as determinants of narrative identities and the meaning-making process that they afford. "Contemporary selves" are "saturated" with the complex and shifting demands of social life and they have difficulties in achieving unity and purpose; instead, fragmentation and multiplicity seems to be the norm (Gergen, 1991; McAdams, 2011). However, as McAdams (2011: 102) points out, "… people living in complex, postmodern societies still feel a need to construe some modicum of unity, purpose, and integration amidst the swirl and confusion". People still seek a kind of meaning that accounts for the rapidly evolving, multi-layered, and complex social and cultural ecologies in which they are situated. Such complex digital ecologies bring a myriad of contradictory cultural tendencies that mingle in the technologically enhanced semiosphere (Bruni, 2014). Individuals and cultural collectivities identify themselves and adhere to emerging narratives that informed their actions while they attempt to conciliate cultural contradictions and dissonances. For instance, there is a myriad of cultural paradoxes in "the cause for sustainability". Today, cultural narrative identities evolve in the middle of massive information overflow, media addictions, attention deficits, and cognitive dissonances, which are reproducing many of the "thousands of cultural details" that reinforce unsustainable behaviors (Bateson, 1972) – even when sustainability becomes an overt generalized normative goal. In fact, the eco-epistemological crisis can actually be re-conceptualized as a cultural identity crisis.

In concomitance, we are witnessing unsustainable cultural clashes among new emerging "paradoxical identities" (i.e.: the tensions between a given identity and its implied agency in contexts that deny the identification process). The issues propelled by the social inequalities of the globalized society, such as the massive and out-of-control migratory fluxes, exacerbate dramatically the already grave problems of inclusion/exclusion, integration, secessionism/annexationism, cultural homogenization/diversity, and the tensions between traditions and "progress". One key aspect in the conception of "narrative identity" is the anticipatory world-building practice implicit in any kind of individual or cultural identity. In the narrative approach that links identity to agency (and social action), prolepsis is all about how we incorporate hopes, expectations and goals into our stories. In this context, populist configurations of cultural narrative identities have normative effects that condition action into loops of self-fulfillment prophesies, which may eventually lead to unsustainable paths. Perhaps one of the most dominating self-fulfillment prophesies with normative power in our current narrative trajectories is that of a technological eudemonia, in which technological convergence will allegedly provide solutions to all possible harshness inherent to the human condition and to the entropic drift of life in the biosphere. This is well exemplified by the positivist and utopian techno-optimistic narratives of trans- and post-humanism, which are rhetorically implicit in many scientific and economic agendas and closely intertwined with pervasive science fiction. The new generations are submitted to a process of cultural narrowing by the pervasiveness of such narratives in a plethora of transmedia platforms and channels. These new science fiction mythologies substitute the mythologies that carry the rich cultural heritage of traditional wisdom. This is creating difficulties for the new generations to discern the ontological boundaries of their cultural narrative identities – between fiction and reality – making them vulnerable to intended or unintended rhetorical strategies for the adoption of the beliefs and value systems of what Hans Jonas calls the built-in automatic utopianism of technical progress (Jonas, 1984: 21). However, if the plot advances only in terms of foresight, neglecting or even despising the cultural hindsight provided by traditions, the resulting collective agency will prospect future trajectories that are divorced from traditional sources of wisdom: "We need wisdom most when we believe in it least". (Jonas, 1984: 21).

The aim of this incipient framework was to bring together different but compatible perspectives on what could be called "processual cultural narrative identities", having as gluing concepts the notion of *narrative identity* on the one hand, and the notion of *heterarchy of values* on the other. The objective was to explore whether a processual heterarchical perspective can be of utility in understanding the paradoxes and contradictions in the contemporary cultural dynamics that are shaping our reality, and which constraint the future through the negotiation of meaning-making in normative processes, which in turn are taking form in new overlapping narrative cultural identities. For this purpose it becomes important to understand the centrality of "values" in the determination of identities. Once we have the consideration of value-adherence in multilayer cultural processes and networks, we are bound to consider heterarchical processuality in order to be able to elucidate the rationality of the putative paradoxes and contradictions.

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