

IDENTITY AND SURROUNDINGS. A CRITICAL READING IN AN TRANSCALAR PERSPECTIVE

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1. Introduction

Both political and scientific worlds are paying growing attention to the "conceptual chameleon" - according to Morin (2001, p. 99) - known as culture, in all its multiple forms: from identity to popular traditions, from religious issues to interethnic conflict. Like a river in flood, culture draws the attention of public administrators and politicians, journalists and scientists, entrepreneurs and essayists; unexpected changes occur in people who usually focus their attention on completely different matters, using very different terms.

The geographical world is not immune from this trend. It is no accident – as pointed out by Claval (2002) – that many people speak about a "cultural turning point", with regard to the fact that the cultural approach could give a new epistemological basis to the discipline.

But is it really a turning point? Are cultural phenomena, aspects and problems treated in abstract or concrete terms? Are we speaking about containers or contents? A turning point means "a radical change in the course of events" (Devoto e Oli, 1995), and therefore a revision of contents – that is to say conceptual categories – in the light of new values, and verifying the compatibility of these values to other important questions of our times, such as eco-development, social justice or human rights. Without this revision, there is a danger that contradictions, incongruities and imprudence could emerge, with a layer of rhetoric covering cultural issues, as always happens when we speak about incontrovertible concepts without considering practical implications.

The most relevant danger, however, is that culture could become a mere tool for political legitimization and social consensus, both in the economic world - following the new ethnic trend of the global market, more and more focused on local tradition, typical products, handicrafts - and the political world, whose interactions are being reformed on coordinates which are still unclear. In other words, there is the concrete risk that culture could become a mere romantic and reassuring label, which speaks of traditions, historical roots, of a simple world which no longer exists, but that at the same time guarantees the continuation of the status quo, disarming the critical capacities and canceling the intrinsic innovative potential.

The cultural dimension, in fact, contains elements that could usher in a turning point, at least because it is able to trigger reflections related to the existential dimension of life, the relationships between human beings, the relationship between society and environment, the realm of the meanings and the symbolic values of objects and places, beyond the materialism and individualism of the modern age. It could be an important occasion for a general review of consolidated opinions and behavior, which are part of an entire way of interpreting reality and of pursuing progress, which is in an evident state of crisis and needs to be concretely rethought.

This paper deals in particular with the case of cultural identity, which is one of the most treated topics in recent scientific literature and strongly linked to other important questions, such as multiculturalism, local development and cultural diversity. The aim is to give a critical reading of these topics and to make a proposal, starting from the basic geographical concept of scale.

2. The identity revival

During the last few years the debate over collective identity has grown steadily, as the considerable number of pages and initiatives on the topic shows. Various factors have solicited a new interest in this "process of construction of meaning, based on a cultural attribute or a set of cultural attributes in relation between them, to which is given priority over other sources of meaning" (Castells, 2003, p. 6).

Identity is a topic mainly dealt with by sociology, anthropology and philosophy. Attention is thus directed towards the disorientation that economically developed societies suffer due to

the break-down of the certainties created in the modern age, caused by a general process of deconstruction and dematerialization, where even places seem to lose their meaning and their symbolic potential. Eloquent, in this sense, are the words of Zygmunt Bauman, when he speaks of identity threatened by “liquid modernity, where not only the individual collocations in society but also the places that individuals want to have access to and to settle in rapidly evaporate and can only with difficulty be used as supports for their life’s projects” (Bauman, 2002, p. 184).

From the literature on the topic, it appears that identity is “a play of relationships, or a dialogue between different spaces and cultural styles, in the late-modern setting of a world where there is no longer any cultural authenticity, but only different shapes of contamination, of syncretism, of mixtures, of babelism: identities thus in perpetual nomadic transition” (Bonesio, 2003, p. 1003). The idea of a complex, plural and dynamic identity is created, which is capable of overcoming the division of a “world in fragments”, which is becoming more and more difficult to manage by the traditional political establishments (Geertz, 1999), up to the point of denying the value of specific identities and supporting a “mestizo logic” (Amselle, 1999), based on common roots and everlasting relationships between cultures, so as to avoid the “clash of civilization” formulated by Samuel Huntington (1997).

Meanwhile, the information networks seem to reduce the relevance of the variable proximity and to increase that of accessibility, through which it is possible to participate in the “virtual communities” of the global system, where the basic condition is the sharing of ideas and interests instead of a concrete space of life (Wolf, 1992).

However, if on the one hand a large part of the scientific world is dealing with identity in this way, on the other there is a political and institutional world, which is described in terms strongly linked to the territorial dimension. The concept of identity has appeared on the scene, in fact, also because it is more and more associated with that of local development: from the provisions of Agenda 21 to the programs of local institutions, identity emerges as the fundamental element for the carrying out of an autochthonous and participated development, as a factor which is able to solicit social cohesion and unity of purpose. Thanks to this process a specific lexicon of local development has arisen, so that identity is part of that medley of terms – together with stakeholders, governance, empowerment, historical roots, popular traditions, local culture, groups of local action, plan of local action – largely used by scientists, politicians and administrators.

In the European Union the creation/revaluation of local identities is associated with the search for a common supranational identity, which is considered a relevant basis for the process of political union - so much desired, but never really pursued – that is soliciting a new interest also because of the nation-state crisis and the weakening of its postulates (Badie, 1996).

In seeking these objectives, a traditional model of identity has been invoked, based on the same elements used in soliciting or strengthening the sense of belonging to the national community, such as historical roots, popular traditions, myths and rites; a model of cultural identity, therefore, which has been moved from the national to the local and supranational level, as if moving an entire contents to a new container. The traditional concept of cultural identity, besides, is largely known and present in the European collective imagination and it has further reasons for being a winner, considering that the sense of belonging at the local level has been always strong, as confirmed by the atavistic rivalry between cities and towns.

3. Cultural identity and local development

The model of identity used for soliciting local development involves some perplexities. First, cultural identity does not imply social cohesion, interest in public affairs or in the plans for the territory. Social integration was easily found while environment, society and economy constituted a whole, substantially closed and self-centered, cemented with specific traditions, rules and communication codes, according to a spatial order structured essentially in “nuclear and area shapes” (Dematteis, 1998a, p. 265). The conventional concept of identity has been constructed just around the concept of *Gemeinschaft* (community), that Ferdinand Tönnies (1963) defined as the aggregation of individuals linked by solidarity relations and inherent projectuality, during an age widely dominated by rural activities.

But the link between environment, society and economy has progressively loosened: the contacts with *otherness* and elsewhere have become stronger, creating syncretism and extremely varied hybrids, and determining economic organizations often alien to autochthonous features. Opportunistic and utilitarian relations have substituted those of solidarity and of mutual aid, determining the growth of the so-called *Gesellschaft* (society), that Tönnies found in the urban environments of his time and which has also progressively involved rural contexts, which have become more and more similar to the cities in their social structures and life styles.

Thus, of the traditional concept of cultural identity there has remained mainly the message for the *otherness*, the recognition of themselves as different from others, proclaiming one's own originality in a global system where homologizing behaviors and tendencies give new value and strength to specificity (Hannerz, 2001). It is not so strange, then, to find local societies who are ready to declare their pride in belonging in situations which involve "the stranger", but which are completely incohesive.

An eloquent example, in this sense, is represented by Carnia, a mountain region in northwestern Friuli (Italy). This region, in appearance, seems characterized by specific environmental and cultural aspects, but internally it reveals an increasing social fragmentation, as demonstrated by the difficulties in realizing projects, which demand direct involvement and common aims. Carnia, in this sense, is an example of a territory where the transition to modernity has radically affected the traditional links between culture, society and economy, breaking the social ties and facilitating the merger of individualism and rivalry, together with a widespread sense of regret for the past and high level of alcoholism.

To invoke the concept of cultural identity as a factor of social cohesion and local development, within societies which are structurally desegregated and individualistic seems then rather rhetorical. Certainly, this process does not lead to cohesive effects, on the contrary, the risk of soliciting further divisions between different communities - that is to say between "us" and "them" - is high, and this is not a desirable prospect, as will be amplified below.

This is not to say that some collectivities with a specific cultural identity do in fact exist, but it is certainly not possible to speak so easily about cultural identity, as normally happens, only because of the presence of some cultural features or traditions that "make the difference", because often these elements have lost their original meaning and are functional on extempore targets, which nearly always follow the logic of territorial marketing.

Before speaking of cultural identity and local development, it would be opportune to perform an empirical analysis of collective identities, searching for social relationship nets, shared values and rules, code of communication, for example following the methodological approach suggested by Vallega (2003). Probably a variegated picture would result and if real collective identity is strictly linked to social cohesion and sense of belonging to the territory probably the conclusion would be that many cultural identities are in fact only apparent.

Another perplexity arises when conventional cultural identity is evoked as a model *tout court*, considering that collectivities are not always provided with a cultural identity, that many of them may have lost it over time, assimilated by stronger identities, and that some collectivities have never developed a real cultural identity. Particularly, the problem affects large urban contexts, where social fragmentation reaches the highest level, where the configuration of spaces reflects the capitalist logic of profit, where the proliferation of *non-places* never ends, where the excess of sensorial stimulation leads to emotional atrophy and to so-called "*blasé* personalities", as defined by Simmel (2001), that is to say individuals who follow a rational and opportunistic logic, and are completely incapable of interacting emphatically with each other.

4. Global system and cultural filters

The possibilities of direct or indirect contact with *otherness* and elsewhere are so frequent and intense that it is not possible to avoid considering the local dimension at a potential global level.

Many studies have pointed out how the local is comparable to an open system provided with *autopoietic* capacities, but also to a node of global networks, which is linked to all the other local systems by material and immaterial communication networks (Magnaghi 1998,

2000; Becattini and Sforzi, 2001). Thanks to the systemic theory, in fact, we have acquired an important key to the understanding of the complex realities, the feedback processes, the relationships between the parts and between the parts and the whole, and the need to evaluate the evolution and the direction of the system (Vallega, 1995).

But looking at reality through a cultural filter - that is to say through specific systems of values and goals - facts and events seem to gain another meaning, as if logical acquisitions, when filtered through the sensible experience, enter a one-way-only street, which does not allow reciprocity of meaning. And it is for this reason that contradictions, empty rhetoric and a dangerous superficiality occur, as will be illustrated in the following cases.

An example of contradiction arises when making a comparison between cultural identity and multiculturalism, at least in the terms by which they are normally considered in political and scientific context. How is it possible to reconcile a concept of cultural identity as specified above, which exalts specific traditions, languages and religious faiths of each community, with that of multiculturalism, which evokes on the contrary the integration of different cultures and ethnic groups in the same territory? This is an obvious ethnocentric contradiction for at least three reasons: i) underdevelopment and related migration flows are considered as structural and unavoidable facts, which will continue "normally" to exist; ii) cultural identity and local development are considered as prerogatives of economically advanced societies and not of all the local communities of the global system; iii) multiculturalism takes the shape of a coveted goal reserved only for developed territories, also because, at present, it is rather odd to imagine intense flows of migrants who from Europe, the United States or Japan move towards Africa, Asia or Latin America looking for better life conditions (Banini, 2003a).

Thus, enormous energies are engaged in integrating migrants from cultures and territories which are very different from each other and from the autochthonous culture, trying to solve obvious and difficult problems of integration, without admitting (or noticing) that the real problem is how to guarantee (for all the communities of the Planet) the perpetuation of collective identities, the link between population and environment and the planning of future development.

An example of ethnocentric rhetoric arises from the matter of cultural diversity. Thousands of pages have already been written to demonstrate how important it is for humanity. The anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (2001) has summarized under this topic seven fundamental motifs, among which the fact that cultural diversity represents an important resource for the future of all human beings, considering that each culture has its own forms of specific knowledge, which could be useful for the solution of problems of general interest.

Why, then, is so important a concept dealt with only on a formal level, without considering the problem at its roots? It should be clear by now that a culture cannot exist without a plan of development, and this is possible only if local cultures can plan their own destiny in their places of origin and evolution.

Local development does not mean making the resources of a territory economically profitable, but ensuring that local societies are able to choose when, why and how to utilize their resources, according to their culture, their values, their goals, on the basis of the specific environmental and social features of their territory. The local character of a resource, in fact, is not due to its "effective material presence in a place, but to the capacity of the settled society to control the specific use of the same resource" (Giusti, 1998, p. 154).

Similarly, very often the value of "union in diversity" is evoked: an expression, which has become a slogan of the European Union, but always inside its own borders. Also in this case, in fact, concepts of prime ethical content are resorted to, but without supplying them with concrete implications.

There is instead a very simple concept to demonstrate that unity in diversity is necessary, which can be synthesized in two words only: complementarity and interdependence. Dematteis uses these two terms when speaking of the relationships between local systems, in the sense that local systems are inclined to specialize their functions, and therefore, unavoidably, they become more and more dependent on each other. Local systems, moreover, are nodes of global networks, forming part of the same global system interconnected by material and immaterial networks (Dematteis, 2002). For these reasons, what happens to a local system is destined sooner or later to produce effects on other local systems, even to the

entire Planet, just like in the famous paradox of Edward Lorenz, according to which the heartbeat of a butterfly in Brazil can provoke a tornado in Texas.

Therefore, why are the principles of the general system theory - from which such observations derives - rationally accepted, but when the cultural filter is adopted, the ability to reason in complex terms is lost? Perhaps because, once again, the cultural perspective contains an ethnocentric component, which hinders us from seeing beyond our own vision of the world. On the contrary, it should be clear by now that many visions of interpreting reality exist, all equally valid and necessary.

Finally, an example of ethnocentric superficiality. Cultural identity is a very strong concept, because it refers to “unquestionable” matters - like language, popular traditions, religion - that have intimate, deep, affective implications and therefore are not easily “negotiable”. Cultural identity is moreover a cumbersome issue, because it is dense in references that evoke specific meanings, with not always positive contents. When speaking of cultural identity, it is almost automatic to think of a community which is proud of its own specific characteristics and inclined to defend its own roots from any external interference, but is equally unavoidable to think of many events of human history where these aspects have reached extreme limits, causing bloody conflicts and brutal abuses of power, as the national movements of the modern age have demonstrated (Graham, Ashworth, Tunbridge, 2000).

Effectively, the conventional concept of cultural identity risks is being interpreted and applied wrongly, especially in difficult situations that affect many areas of the Planet. In other words, if Europe has acquired sufficient skills to manage the inheritance of its conflicts, parochialism and atavistic rivalries, using a powerful concept like that of cultural identity, this is not the case in many other contexts of the world - where violent interethnic conflicts persist and where the fight for self-determination is bloodily repressed. It is not by chance that the question of identity is often used by pressure groups as a pretext to trigger conflicts and wars, knowing that in this way they stimulate the deep core of human feelings, for which many would be prepared to die.

In a closely interconnected global system, where news and ideas travel in real time, where at least formally ideals of peace and universal friendship are pursued, perhaps it is wise to avoid concepts that evoke exclusivism and potential abuses and to insist rather – even at the cost of appearing naive - on elements that can facilitate the opening up of mutual understanding between different ethnic groups, cultures and people.

5. New coordinates for identity

The observations made above seem to converge on the same point: the necessity of reconsidering the concept of identity in the light of a different way of interpreting the relationships between individuals and between society and nature, not only inside the local system, but also between the various local systems of the world.

At the local scale the main problem is to re-establish enlarged social relations, beyond the primary ties (family and friends), to escape the gears of an economic system which, under the false myth of freedom, success and self-realization, tends not only to favor individualistic aims rather than social ones, but also to find personal solutions to public matters (Beck, 2000).

The new logic of development, based on native and shared elements, offers in this sense a very interesting possibility for all individuals, beyond cultural belonging or social status, so that they can agree on solutions and targets for the territory where they live (or one they would want to help to develop), on the basis of autochthonous features.

In other words, it would mean giving prominence to the spatial dimension of existence and to making it the mainstay for collective identity, since if it is true that contemporary reality is rapidly changing it is also true that it all happens within a material space. A material space that collectivities have to plan and to manage according to principles of supportability, as the expression of a shared will. Territory as a space of interaction and social construction, therefore, which prompts the sense of belonging, which it is appreciated because it expresses the will of the community one lives in, which inspires towards environmental and social sustainability and which it is able to generate *topophilia*, i.e. an affective response, according to the well-known definition of Tuan (1974).

Cultural identity, in this way, would not be a limit for all those communities that have lost their own cultural references or that perhaps have never shared a true common feeling. The processes underway, moreover, lead us to think that it is possible to find *ex novo* structures of collective identity, that make reference to the concrete character of the places of our life (Giusti, 1998), discovering or re-discovering *in itinere* values and objects to pursue, also in order to reflect an image of their territory recognizable from outside. In this view, cultural goods would also gain in importance not only as objective confirmations of cultures, but as entities able to promote relationality and projectuality, considering that the status of a cultural good “does not depend on what has happened in the past, for it originates in the present relational space and projects itself more or less explicitly into the future” (Dematteis, 1998b, p. 31).

Other coordinates to redefine identity are process-based approach and change. The increased mobility of people, the migratory movements from underdeveloped regions, the use of consumer goods coming from the most different areas of the globe, Internet, satellite television, together with several other stimuli lead to continuous contact with other worlds. These stimuli on the one hand enrich existential experience, but on the other hand destabilize individuals and collective points of reference.

The issue of stability and change, in a geographical perspective, originates above all in the comparison between the stability of the spaces, that show the signs of choices taken over time, and a mobile concept, in perennial evolution like that of identity. In this sense, Dematteis can once again be mentioned, for he speaks about a “genetic code” of the local system, in reference to the “peculiar principles of its reproductive functioning, its inner logic, the common way of thinking and acting of the subjects that compose it” (Dematteis, 2002, p. 46), so that “every local system has an identity defined by the limits of its invariant elements in the medium-long period” (*ibidem*). That is to say that communities transform themselves with the passage of time, but some material and immaterial elements can maintain their function as basic elements of collective identity - as some researches focused on specific local contexts demonstrate (Caldo e Guarrasi, 1994) - when their meaning is constantly recognized and renewed.

The territory is able therefore to produce and to renew shared values, to generate a “territorial grammar” (Carta, 1999), and when this ability is lost, it is however possible to undertake an acquaintance of the complexity of the territory, of its signs and its symbols, in the light of a shared will.

In this sense, the analysis of some local contexts shows that if it is true that the world is changing much more quickly than in the past and that communities are subject to much more frequent and intense stresses, it is also true that it is possible to graft innovation onto tradition, when tradition is based on shared values that have stood the test of time. The case of Friuli (northeastern Italy) is eloquent: a region that is able to welcome innovation without compromising its specific rural aspect, because the local population has maintained a strong link with its peasant origins (Banini, 2003b).

6. Towards transcalar identities

The concept of identity today cannot be structured solely in a local perspective. The risk of focusing attention on local development and conventional cultural identity is to consider facts and problems in a self-centered way, to consider what is “inside” as separate from what is “outside”, and to erect mental barriers in a world that - on the contrary - is more and more connected and interdependent. The problem is how to frame the identity question in a wider context of reference, of potentially global dimensions, in the light of the reflections discussed above.

Collective identity has never actually been limited only to the local dimension, for it has been also related to political or administrative spaces of progressively larger dimensions, so as to give a multi-scale configuration to identity. In Europe, for example, we could still speak today about many territorial identities that involve us in different moments of our existence, so that we feel ourselves European when we vote for the EU Parliament, while our national pride rises during the world soccer championships.

Reasoning in multi-scale terms, we would be led to believe that the sharing of views and aims should be pursued inside progressively wider administrative or political demarcations, until they include the whole globe, considering that the smaller the scale, the more universal are the values and the aims to share. In this sense, the model of identity would be structured on predefined territorial areas, progressively smaller, just as the canonical model of sustainable development suggests, by following a political-institutional perspective (Vallega, 1995).

The systemic concept of the local, however, leads us to think of the identity issue in vastly different terms, not only because today the local can be identified in every sub-global territory, and is not necessarily delimited by political or administrative boundaries, not only because the local is the node of global networks, complementary and interdependent with all the other nodes, but also because diversity, interconnection and complementarity are inside the local.

The concept of identity, in fact, can no longer be related to a “unitary and cohesive local community whose values and interests are mainly comprised within a local territorial context” (Dematteis, 2002, p. 57), but to a “local complex of subjects, part of which act mainly as nodes of local networks, while others, also interacting locally, belong to transversal multilocalized nets, or rather, participate in the values and the interests of various systems” (ibidem).

If, therefore, the local dimension more and more becomes part of the global system and if local societies more and more assume articulated configurations, the identity concept should also be seen in the light of the relationship networks - effective or potential, inside and outside - of every local system.

In other words, today it is no longer possible to consider an identity concept structured on a local or multiscale dimension of existence. It is necessary, on the contrary, to think of identity as a relative concept, on the basis of which every local society is aware of its own specifics but also those of others, and of the fact that all these specifics are complementary and interconnected, in a mosaic of diversity – whose borders are less and less clearly identifiable – which constitutes a global level, that joins all the collectivities of the Planet.

What has been stated so far can therefore be summarized by proposing a *transcalar identity*, for two main reasons. First, because *scale* is a core concept of geography, which incorporates spatial dimension, or rather, the relationship between society and nature, the hinge around which could be structured a new collective sense of belonging. Moreover, *scale* is a concept that incorporates the relativity of the spatial dimension, both from a quantitative (the single parts in comparison to the whole) and qualitative (the diversity between the parts) point of view. Second, because *trans* is a prefix of Latin origin that means both “beyond” and “through”. And the proposal is just that of an identity that looks “beyond” the local context (a specific view of the world) and “through” the filter of other territorial dimensions, towards the aim of unity in the diversity.

Transcality, then, means to fix the relationship of the set of the collective values of a local system to that of other local systems, assuming as *alter ego* the *othernesses* present on the territory and those with which the local is directly or indirectly connected, starting from the basis that *otherness* can carry out a positive role in the construction of identity (Remotti, 1996). By means of an open and serene confrontation with diversity it is possible in fact to verify the system of values, to calibrate its meanings, to confer ulterior meaning to the choices, so that collective identity would be the expression not only of a social cohesion between insiders which would support the development of a specific local system, but also the preliminary condition for interacting effectively with other territories, from the small local community to the global level, passing through the several supralocal levels, more or less equivalent to political-administrative entities.

Transcality means therefore the structuring of the identity concept on the relativity of the local concept, which can have variable dimension depending on the aspects under consideration, because the communication codes and the shared norms and aims can be very different, even if they are always inside one great *holon* of global dimensions, which is already structurally interconnected for economic and social reasons.

In such a perspective, the *alter ego* of the local becomes in fact the global, since for local we could mean not only the smallest territorial level of reference (as normally happens), nor any supralocal aggregate, big or small, with or without political or administrative boundaries.

The local could be any context at a sub-global level, on condition that internally it has its shared values and aims; essentially, the problem would then be to reconcile a sense of belonging both at the local and the global scale (Tomlinson, 2001).

The problem is that the search for common values and projectualities differs widely from scale to scale. If on the large-scale it is possible and necessary to refer to specific environmental, cultural or social features of the territory, on a small scale it would be necessary to have recourse to the dialogic, which Edgar Morin defines as “the relation which is at the same time antagonistic, concurrent and complementary between order, disorder and organization” (Morin, 2001, p. 86).

7. Concluding remarks

Discussing identity in transcalar terms can appear somewhat ingenuous, since it means evoking a dimension of existence involving solidarity, reciprocity, cooperation, which the global system - more and more oriented to the marketing of needs, expectations and potentialities - has relegated to a marginal position. It seems equally naive to speak about transcalar identity while all over the world wars and crimes occur for reasons of identity, or rather, for nations who ask for their right to a territory and a State, for the persecutions and the violence still today exercised on ethnic minorities.

But it is actually on the basis of these considerations that we need to reflect on a different way to express our position-in-the-world. To know that within this global system problems of dramatic entity still occur - beyond the ethnocentric formulations, the economic interests and the political implications - becomes fundamental for re-organizing the orders of priority at every territorial level and for understanding that what happens “outside” is in some way happening “inside” too. All the more reason, therefore, that the identity issue should be intended as process and an exercise, in a transcalar perspective through which it would be possible to consider facts and problems in the light of different “vision of the world”, specific to every local dimension, but also complementary and interconnected to the others.

There is, besides, a global dimension of identity that is often neglected: the fact that all the people of the world inhabit the same planet is a perception of disarming simplicity but one which is not widespread in the collective imagination. Nevertheless it is a topic with ancient historical roots and one which illustrious personalities of the scientific world have recently addressed: from the “community of planetary destiny” of Edgar Morin (2001) to the “responsibility of species» of Ulf Hannerz (2001) or the “collective intelligence” of Pierre Levy (2002). In all cases, the reference is to the necessity to conceive human existence beyond ones context of life and culture of belonging, in order to embrace a total dimension that joins all human beings, over and above all specific differences.

Thinking of identity in a global perspective could be fundamental for reformulating scales of values and social norms at every territorial level, in order to acquire knowledge of a dimension of life that unites all the inhabitants of the Earth and that would lead us pursue aims of general usefulness. To urge a sense of belonging to the global dimension could be then a good beginning for focusing attention on the complementarity and interdependence that takes place between the several local contexts of the world, in order to supply a context of reference to diversity. Concepts that already belong to the history of scientific thought, even if they have been kept alive only by the great universal religions.

On the global scale it would be also important to verify which values, which attitudes, which opinions can be shared by all the people so as to construct a platform of planetary consent: an objective that has been pursued at least from the birth of the United Nations, re-launched during the Rio Conference on Environment and Development (1992), and codified in thousands of official documents, but without achieving signified results¹.

The problem is that a process activated in the halls of the international institutions - in the presence of Asian, African or Latin American government representatives steeped in western

¹ Among the most recent documents there is also the report of the Commission on Global Governance, whose eloquent title is “Our Global Neighbourhood”. In this report, however, as Tomlinson (2001) remarks, the neighbour is not related to a community of values or to a sharing of links, but to a “forced proximity”, which is facilitated by the same global processes.

culture who already speak the same language - cannot represent the effective terms of the interethnic comparison. Therefore, it is only by starting from the dialogue and the sharing of experiences between citizens of various worlds that it would be possible to outline a global identity, or rather “many cultures of planetary identity interacting between each other” (Di Cristofaro Longo, 1993, p. 281).

At this point, it should be clear that a concept of transcalar identity is not particularly directed at the institutions, who are too involved in the mechanisms of the political and economic system, but to all the “normal” people sensitive to the idea of opening up a different way of thinking about existence. The aim would be to create a dialogue between different systems of values, but starting from the common people, speaking and acting together.

In this process aimed at creating “a composite body, locally variegated and totally integrated” (Geertz, 1999, p. 25) the idea would be to create forms of collaboration, federation and subsidiaries between local entities (Magnaghi, 2000), for a real integration between citizens who belong to various worlds but also to a single Earth, according to the title of the next IGU Congress (*One Earth, Many Worlds* - Glasgow 2004).

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