

Identity Market

"In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of meaning. ... People increasingly organize their meaning not around what they do but on the basis of what they are, or believe they are."

(Castells 2000, p.3)

When examining the notion of identity before and during modernity, theorists often describe a monolithic, homogenous, integrated self (Castells 1997, Gergen 1991, Giddens 1991). They suggest that such a self was "firmly grounded in society and history, notably in class, race and gender" (Agger 2004, p.110). This assumption has dissolved as we have moved into a period variously described as postmodern (Lyotard 1984), late modernity (Giddens 1991), or network society (Castells 1997). The self has become "more complex and mobile than ever before" (Lyotard 1984, p.15). With the dissolution and weakening of many of the established social institutions, individuals have turned to more disparate, reflexive collectivities to create meaningful relations from which a meta-stable identity can be constructed. A number of websites has emerged that serve to facilitate this new form of identity creation – one example is RTMark (www.rtmark.com).

RTMark positions itself as a brokerage service for social actions. Activists with potential projects can list these projects on RTMark, where visitors can review them and become involved with those that they find appealing. Parodying the corporate model of investment in limited corporations, each project is 'listed' and invites visitors to 'invest' in it. Investment can take the form of passive readership, active participation, or contribution of funds. Projects range from GAPS (placing stickers on GAP KIDS stores that read 'Made by children, for children.') to DOHA (shutting down the NYSE through civil disobedience).

Through the RTMark brokerage, individuals can connect themselves to a diverse set of collectives around the world. It is this type of affiliation with social groups on which they can then build a sense of identity. Manuel Castells suggests that within the emergent 'network society', identity results from the internalisation of relationships with social institutions (Castells 1997, p.7). As the large, rigid institutions of modernity decline in their power, the individual plays a larger role in self-reflexively seeking out and initiating these relationships (Melucci 1995, p.51).

In this model, the core of our identity is a series of 'identity-assemblages' – systems created when we as an individual enter into relation with a social collective. While the relationships created through RTMark are ones of collaboration, these identity producing relations might include other forms such as production and consumption – various modes of symbolic communication that generate components of our identity (Castells 2000, p.17). Critiquing the reliance on cultural consumption, Ben Agger refers to this process as the colonisation of the self by capitalism, where identity is assembled by individuals from the available "flotsam and jetsam" of capitalist activity (2004, p.99).



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The Internet is a powerful tool for the creation of identity-assemblages. As a global medium, it provides access to social collectives around the world. We are no longer limited to forming relationships with local institutions, but can engage with groups in other countries. While this may be true of pre-internet technologies (such as consumption of imported products, or identification through global broadcast media), the two-way communication of the Internet provides a deeper, more flexible range of permissible relations.

This increase in the number of possible relationships, and the diversity of those relationships has led to what Kenneth Gergen describes as the saturation of the self. He suggests that “a multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships” results in “fragmentation of self-conceptions” (1997, p.7). As we are able to affiliate with a greater and greater number of social collectives, our identity becomes more and more fragmented and incohesive. Picturing the individual becoming simultaneously part of a multitude of identity-assemblages, we can clearly see how we become “populated with the other” (p.49).

Another consequence of these technologies of identity (from the Internet back to the telephone and the railroad) is the reflexivity of relations. Moving from modernity with its large, rigid social institutions, we enter a network of smaller, more dynamic collectivities that rely more heavily on our ‘organised investment’ for the construction of their own ‘collective identities’ (Melucci 1995, p.43). Giddens terms this ‘institutional reflexivity’ – an acknowledgement that just as we gain identity through relations, so too we shape the institutions we relate to (1991, p.2).

Melucci describes this dependence on individuals through his model of collective identities as social actors formed through ongoing investment and negotiation with a range of related individuals (1995, p.44). As part of this arrangement, the individual self-reflexively constructs identity by investing in various collectives – a process of ‘identization’ (p.51).

From these related approaches, it is clear that the identity-assemblage is a pivotal source of meaning for both the individual and the collective. The assemblage describes an ‘identity transaction’, where the two entities reciprocally define themselves through each other.

While it was initially a parody of capitalism, the financial market structure of RTMark serves as a useful analogy for this transactional model of identity. The value of identity relationships is further reinforced as companies such as Amazon offer cash incentives for expansion of their relational networks. These relations provide value to both the individual and the collective – value that may then be used in other cultural transactions. This chaining of relations creates an economy of identification in which we are all enmeshed – an economy that is being exponentially accelerated by the rapid diffusion capabilities of new media technologies (Ayers 1999).

Anti-corporate social action groups such as RTMark and the eTOY.corporation may lampoon the economic rationalism of late capitalism, but their pseudo-corporate structures reinforce their reliance on the economy of identity for their own existence.



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As institutions dissemble, identity mutates. From a static location in a network of rigid institutions, identity becomes itself a mesh of dynamic relations. Self is emergent from a rhizomatic connectivity of collective actors. From moment to moment, with each step, each utterance, each purchase, each moment of meaning making, we connect and disconnect. In each connection, identity is exchanged, shared, stolen, bought and sold. Identity has become currency. In a world where the established relations of institutional power fade to irrelevance, the only politics is the manifold production of identity.

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