

ON TIME, SELF AND CONTEXT

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"Underneath the self which acts are little selves which contemplate and which render possible both the action and the active subject. We speak of our 'self' only in virtue of these thousands of little witnesses which contemplate within us: it is always a third party who says 'me'".ⁱ

Gilles Deleuze

"...the human mind cannot be understood by theories which leave out the self and its activities. It is a fact of self which makes human cognition social cognition."ⁱⁱ

John C. Turner

Not only does this quote by Deleuze suggest the inner narrative we all have and the many selves within our one self, it also relates the self to time. The self cannot be understood without a relation to time because our very selves are composed of past, present and future and any action we make is based in a synthesis of this internal temporality.ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed the very imprint of time on identity is so intrinsically interwoven with our senses that perception happens moment by moment, so then does our existence through a mesh of past, present and future impressions. But it is a past, present and future which is reflective; reflective of our self in time as much as it is a constituent of its own time. Deleuze suggests memory functions as a reproducing mechanism which reconstitutes details within its own temporal space; in essence an organic simulacrum, or a copy without an original. Likewise, for Deleuze, the future is reflexive, a general understanding which goes beyond an immediate anticipation to a reflective prediction; again a reflection of our self in time. In both instances Deleuze discounts the immediacy of retention and anticipation and he is right in doing so because few of us live in a constant state of action and reaction. We reflect. Deleuze called this the 'passive synthesis' of imagination. He defined 'passive synthesis' in this case as a living present which contains past and future constituted in time; a synthesis of time which occurs in the mind that contemplates.^{iv} Memory (the past) fused with understanding (the future) superimposed on imagination (the present contemplating mind); it's a compelling image of what makes up the self and why Deleuze said "it is always a third party who says *me*" The 'me' who was, is carried within the 'me' who is, just as is the 'me' who anticipates, predicts and understands. There is no separating the selves, all past and future is contained in the present, just as there is no identifying with any 'self' other than the one in the present, temporality prevents it. Mikhail Bakhtin puts it this way, "If I tell (orally or in writing) an event that I have just lived, in so far as 'I am telling' this event, I find myself already outside of the time-space in which the event occurred. To identify oneself absolutely with oneself, to identify one's 'I' with the 'I' that I tell is as impossible as to lift oneself up by one's hair..."^v

Time mediates the self and context; each moment of contemplation is a moment of existence - an act of the self and the acting self. Time renders possible the contemplating self and the context which is contemplated. Context is the experience and perceptions our senses bump into; the influences, emotions, and reality of the physical world. Context is also how we are in the moment, our psychological and emotional state, our psychological and emotional responses. This is why self cannot be extricated from context; the influence of our context forms our self and our self responds to the influence of our context. Our context and our identity is our society.

Social Identity Theory, as part of social psychology, points to context as the prime influence for developing self-identity. We measure ourselves in relation to the social groups we are part of and in turn take or refute the values of these social groups as our own, depending on how we see ourselves in relation to the group. "The social identity analysis posits that people are both individuals and group members and display both individuality and collective identity. Individuality, expressed in personal identities and individual differences, is one basic level at which the self is categorized and behaviour takes place...however, individuality is seen as a dynamic, variable and context-dependent. It is not seen as some fixed, basic substratum of the self. It, too, is a function of an interaction between motives, expectations, knowledge and reality...[f]or some people in relation to some groups, to leave the group for another or as an individual is as meaningful as trying to become someone else."^{vi}

Is it meaningful then to ask what is self, what is identity, who am I, how am I? Indeed, not only is it meaningful, we must continue to ask these questions. As we are formed from our society, when society changes we are changing and conversely, as we change society changes. It doesn't matter that we can never fully define the self. What

does matter is that at every moment, we perceive sensory input and make simultaneous decisions which impel us to act sometimes on impulse, often upon reflection. This act-ing defines us. Our history is what happened to us, but what we choose to do with that history is what defines us. As perceiving individuals we must ask 'who am I' because in doing so we ask what is our world and in its present state nothing seems more urgent than a response to this question as millions die in civil wars around the globe; as we witness every day the climate changes which we're responsible for; as slavery continues, no longer along racial lines perhaps, but sexual slavery, child trafficking, and worker exploitation; and as we witness the rampages of capitalism through a democratic system which has collapsed in all but name.^{vii} The way we communicate now is not just about technology, it's also symptomatic of a context gone haywire. Can we effect change in our context? Can we change ourselves?

ⁱ Deleuze, Gilles (1925-1995), *Difference and Repetition*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1968, and Athlone Press, UK, 1994, re-printed Continuum International Publishing Group, 1997-2011, p. 96

ⁱⁱ 'Some Current Issues in Research on Social Identity and Self-categorization Theories', John C. Turner, *Social Identity*, ed. Naomi Ellemers, Russell Spears & Bertjan Doosje, Blackwell Press, 1999, p. 28

ⁱⁱⁱ Deleuze, Gilles (1925-1995), *Difference and Repetition*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1968, and Athlone Press, UK, 1994, re-printed Continuum International Publishing Group, 1997-2011, p.92, "...memory reconstitutes the particular cases as distinct, conserving them in its own 'temporal space'. The past is then no longer the immediate past of retention but the reflexive past of representation, of reflected and reproduced particularity. [T]he future also ceases to be the immediate future of anticipation in order to become the reflexive future of prediction, the reflected generality of the understanding...in other words, the active syntheses of memory and understanding are superimposed upon and supported by the passive synthesis of the imagination."

^{iv} Ibid, p. 91

^v From Burke, Sean, *The Death and Return of the Author*, p. 52, noted as: Mikhail Bakhtin, quoted in Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, op. cit., p. 52

^{vi} 'Some Current Issues in Research on Social Identity and Self-categorization Theories', John C. Turner, *Social Identity*, ed. Naomi Ellemers, Russell Spears & Bertjan Doosje, Blackwell Press, 1999, pp. 31-33

^{vii} Denning, Michael, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*, Verso, 2004, p. 210, "What do we make of the fact that the rise of political democracy around the world – celebrated in an enormous scholarly literature on 'the transition to democracy' – has been accompanied by the global collapse of social democracy: the savaging of social safety nets, welfare systems and price subsidies, and the global privatization of public lands, public industries, and public services – a new round of enclosures? Our latter-day democrats have dropped equality of condition from their definitions. The theoretical accomplishment of Schumpeter was simply to redefine democracy as the free market in votes: democracies are states not where people rule, nor where there is equality of condition, but simply where ruling elites compete for votes in the market-place of elections. It is not surprising that democracy and capitalism emerge as virtual synonyms, and democratic capitalism appears to be the global consensus."