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Paul Du Gay, Organizing Identity: Persons and Organizations "After Theory." London: Sage, 2007, 193 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/31381)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2-3, maggio-dicembre 2009

Ente di afferenza:

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Book reviews

Paul Du Gay, *Organizing Identity: Persons and Organizations "After Theory."* London: Sage, 2007, 193 pp.

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Many sociologists have built their academic careers working on the issue of "identity." As he explicitly admits, Paul du Gay is one of them. Over the last fifteen years, his name has appeared on the front covers of influential volumes, such as *Questions of Cultural Identity* [1996], co-edited with Stuart Hall. After having contributed to the fortune of "identity," du Gay now wonders about the future destiny of this topic, given that the theoretical spirit which has been animating its study seems to lose ground.

The focal subject of the book can be summarized as follows. The loss of explanatory power suffered by the concept of "identity" has been caused both by an overproduction of theoretical work and by scant attention to empirical description. As a consequence, the social analyst wishing to study the identity of persons and organizations needs to reject those accounts of the "subject" based only on philosophical arguments and, instead, to focus on the ways in which identity is organized in specific places and times.

To meet this goal, du Gay offers a fresh new approach to the so-called "material-cultural making up of 'persons'" [p. 11] and several examples illustrating how it should be applied. The distinguishing feature – which runs as a leitmotiv through the whole book – of the approach is the attention to those contextualized complexes of "techniques" with which individuals are formed as specific persons.

This book, specially written for scholars, has the undoubted merit of providing them with a stimulus to continue research in the very important, albeit inflated, area of identity formation. The variety and careful selection of the terminology is one of the qualities that make this publication different from many others, both in the social sciences and humanities. The reader will be surely pleased to find in all of the chapters technical terms – like "individual," "agent," "person," "personhood," "subject" – treated as analytical notions in a relatively unambiguous way. In fact, one of the central, although implicit, concerns of the book is to impose some kind of order on the often undifferentiated, limited and even contradictory vocabulary that, for long time, has been characterizing much of the scientific debate about identity. Section 1.2. offers a few glimpses of how the skilful use of idioms and words contributes to the precision of du Gay's analysis. Here, for example, the expression "legal personality" is used to refer to the particular "device" by which the law creates "persons" capable of rights and duties [p. 34].

The book is also remarkable in its ability to originally combine insights from various theorists. Chapter 2 – in which Michel Foucault's "techniques of the self" are used in combination with Marcel Mauss' anthropological conception of "body techniques" and with some recent interpretations of Max Weber's work – is worth a glance, to say the least [pp. 40-63]. Some of the analyses with which du Gay strives to put these theoretical categories to work really stand out. To give another example, chapter 3 successfully manages to illustrate that "there is no such thing as the concept of 'self-interest,'" but only historically cultivated self-interested personhoods [pp. 72-84].

Organizing Identity is composed of seven chapters, split into two parts. Before having a closer look at their structure and contents, it is worth adding another short, but not secondary, remark. At the very beginning of the volume, the author informs his readers that portions of the book draw on some of his published and unpublished papers [p. x]. More precisely, chapters 3, 4, 6 and 7 are based on works published over the period 2002-2005. Keeping this information in mind while reading the book might come in useful. In so doing, it will not surprise anyone to realize that each chapter can also be read as an individual essay, separated from the rest.

The first part of the book [chapters 1-4] outlines to what extent and in which ways a “study of persons” can be carried out through sociological, anthropological, and historical tools. In chapter 1, Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu provide the author with some reasons to convincingly argue that individuals acquire definite capacities and attributes for existing as certain sorts of person, only thanks to particular socially instituted forms of training and practices. Chapter 2 adds further theoretical and methodological support to this argument by joining together, as mentioned above, the lines of enquiry of Foucault, Mauss and Weber.

In chapter 3 and 4, the author’s task becomes that of convincing the reader, through reference to concrete examples, of the advantages of his sociological view about identity. In this vein, chapter 3 focuses on how and why in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-century Europe a certain form of self-interested personhood was made up [p. 65]. In particular, the author argues that Thomas Hobbes’ model of man, who rationally acts in view of his own interest, was explicitly designed to find a way of bringing social peace to the turbulent Europe of that time, as well as to conduct a civil life [pp. 72-80].

A second rather different example of identity organization is contained in chapter 4. Here, du Gay illustrates the development of self-service shopping practices in mid-Twentieth-century Britain. To put it briefly, the “self” in “self-service” is unpacked. The author does so by showing how the range of activities and representations that retailers engaged in to improve British customers’ view of self-service contributed to the making up of a new “consuming persona” [pp. 91-98].

The second part of the book [chapters 5-7] can be seen as an additional attempt to provide a vivid illustration of why we need the ‘sociology of persons’ that was introduced in the first part. In one way or another, all this second part deals with the person we know as “state bureaucrat or career civil servant or public administrator” [p. 105], as well as with the organizational domain that this persona belongs to (i.e. state service).

Du Gay makes it plain that chapter 5 puts up a closely argued defence of the “persona of the bureaucrat,” against recent political attempts to transform its conduct. In so doing, some of the basic assumptions of the latest reforms of state bureaux are called into question. In contrast to these assumptions, the author contends that to keep the state running, office-holders have to be considered as officials (i.e. an expression of office) [pp. 103-5]. The essence of his argument is that the distinctive ethos of bureaucratic office, which Max Weber described as an indispensable virtue for liberal regimes, is still the greatest resource for today’s state and administration apparatuses.

Chapter 6 points out that much of contemporary theorizing about organizational change is framed in “epochalist terms” [p. 139]. The author calls “epochalist” those abstract accounts that reduce a range of organizational changes to a couple of universally

applicable principles, thus failing to properly consider their specificity and locatedness. All this said, two cases of “epochalism” in administrative reform are briefly analyzed.

Finally, chapter 7 criticizes ‘expressivist’ versions of governance, namely those accounts of governance that tend to challenge state sovereignty and authority in favour of a self-governing moral community. A direct reference to Hobbes’ thought allows the author to argue that the protection of individual rights and community freedom, that expressivism supporters pretend to fight hard for, can be enforced only if a state is prepared to assume the role of sovereignty.

It is quite plain that the two parts in which the book is split into would require two distinct and more detailed reviews. The short summary just presented, however, allows to shed some light on how their contents have been organized in all. Although the author says that the book is not intended as a simple collection of papers, his effort to give unity to the whole by means of a common framework is not so successful. The reader meets real difficulties in finding, in each chapter, an answer to the framing question of the volume, which concerns the relationship between sociology of persons and theoretical preoccupations with “identity” and “subjectivity” [p. 13]. In a word, the main weakness of du Gay’s work is the absence of something like an overarching thread that deeply links each chapter to the others. Actually, this specific function is partially performed by the opening and ending sections included in every chapter, but one consequence of this is that these sections contain a number of repetitions.

This disadvantage is not at all compensated by the introduction of the book, which unexpectedly determines unrealistic expectations, thus throwing the reader off the track [pp. 1-17]. The introduction should illustrate the various and sundry arguments contained in the whole work, offering a rough guide to what the book should look like. On the contrary, it mainly deals with “social constructionism,” suggesting that its philosophical orientation and (supposed) scepticism towards empirical experience have strengthened the production of theoretical work, instead of those investigations that use the term “identity” in a more descriptive way.

In the introduction, du Gay describes social constructionism as a “critique” designed “to take away self-evidence” from that which forms its object, being it a project, an agenda, a person or whatever else one can think of [p. 4-5]. The set of constructionist theories, moreover, are looked at as something that often ends up as “an all-purpose, across the board formula” [p. 4] that “dictates its conclusions in advance, and also dictates the reaching of the same conclusion in all cases” [p. 7]. The author believes, as a result, that adopting this approach means hampering “understanding of the ways in which particular objects, persons, things are put together, assembled or constructed in the plain, literal sense of the term (i.e. how their identity is organized)” [p. 7].

It is an unpleasant surprise to discover that du Gay directs such a severe criticism against social constructionism, without even making any real distinction between the different theories grouped under this very comprehensive label. Moreover, it seems somewhat limiting to refer to all of these theories as a “move” which only strives to indicate “that the existence or character of something is not determined by the nature of things” [p. 4]. The fact that essentialism has been attracting widespread criticisms from social constructionism is certainly a correct, although pretty familiar, observation. What the introduction curiously forgets to mention, instead, is that a social constructivist kind of

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approach allows to describe the object of study in connection with those specific practical circumstances in which it is formed. Such an oversight becomes even more curious since this point – as the review has shown – is taken very seriously in the rest of the book. Every chapter illustrates indeed that these practical circumstances, which are neither subjective nor fictitious, exert an influence on the object by means of more than concrete rational acts. Is this not slightly contradictory?

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