



'Troubled Identities'

The Danish Conference of Sociology 2012

Date: 19-20 January 2012

Place: Aarhus University



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The study of social change has always been integral to the discipline of sociology. As the ever-vagrant sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues, the transition from traditional to modern societies was characterized by an erosion of social foundations, or what Bauman calls solids. Old identities were replaced by new ones, but the nature, importance and role of identity changed only to a minor extent.

In contemporary society this concern has changed fundamentally as unambiguous and coherent identities are increasingly difficult to establish and maintain. Modern societies are – more than anything else – characterized by an excess of social demands and expectations, compelling the individual to ‘live up to’ often conflicting social identities. Identity work thus, becomes a heavy, if not almost impossible burden to bear.

Troubled identities, such is the premise of this conference, signifies the simultaneous effect of this loss of social foundations and the emergence of a multiplicity of new forms of identification available to the subject. In order to unlock the phenomenon of Troubled Identities, CESAU presents some of the leading international scholars on identity formation in modern societies.

According to German sociologist **Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim**, the modern career woman constitutes a paradigmatic example of a troubled and often mutually contentious identity. In her empirical studies of changes in the sociology of love, marriage and family Beck-Gernsheim demonstrates how many women struggle to reconcile a potentially stressful working career with the personal and social expectations of womanhood, motherhood and family life.

The concept of Troubled Identities implies, to a certain extent, freedom of choice. According to Slovenian philosopher and sociologist **Renata Salecl** it can rightfully be argued that this freedom of choice has itself become today’s totalitarian ideology. We are compelled to choose the food we eat, the schools our children attend, the doctor who



treats us, the books we read on vacation, etc. Choice, according Salecl, encompasses the sole legitimate lifestyle. A paradoxical effect of this freedom of choice is its ability to align and standardize people to an unprecedented degree. We can choose freely among everything on shelf A and shelf B, the only thing forbidden to us is resistance to perceive ourselves as 'a chooser.'

Conflicting identities are a crucial element in **Banu Bargu's** studies of identities and strategies of resistance. Combating an enemy through self-destruction – in the form of hunger strikes, self-immolation or suicide bombing – is an extreme example of Troubled Identities. The predicament isn't simply that identities of resistance are often defined by the adversary; it's closer to a catch-22. Thus the partisan is ultimately posited in a quandary between self-preservation and the desire to change society on the one hand and the very manifest possibility of dying on the other hand.

The challenge of Troubled Identities also extends into the age of childhood and adolescence as Danish anthropologist **Laura Gilliam's** detailed field work among boys from ethnic minority cultures demonstrates. She uncovers how these boys nourish a strong antipathy towards the school while recognizing the symbolic value of education. Through what is perceived as mischief behavior the boys protest against prejudices regarding 'ethnic adolescents', often with the paradoxical side effect of reproducing the exact same discrimination and exclusionary logics that they seek to overthrow.

Finally the political creation of Troubled Identities is a dominant theme in **Per Mouritsen's** research on tolerance and citizenship. The new 'politics of recognition' that distinguishes between good and bad forms of citizenship is a special kind of deliberate misrepresentation of certain social identities. Ironically, this is done by recycling liberal and republican ideals in order to stereotype predominantly Muslim identities as uncivilized, dependent, unreasonable, undemocratic and passive.

Keynotes

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