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SOMEBODY ELSE'S PROBLEM **AS A PRACTICE** **IN THE IDENTITY DISCOURSE**

ABSTRACT The article presents the characteristics of various types of collective identities: hard, programmatic, soft, pluralistic, and proposes an outline of the concept of reflective identity as essential for democratic public discourse. Moreover, the practice of invalidation in the public discourse has been analyzed. Articulated invalidation and silent invalidation have been articulated as two communicative practices and their characteristics. The article presents the social and psychological reasons for invalidation as a practice of public discourse.

Keywords: identity, reflective identity, discourse, somebody else's problem, invalidation

INTRODUCTION

Discourses filling the public space are of diverse nature and aetiology. Anna Horolets rightly observes that defining a discourse is not an easy task. The concept shares the fate of such fuzzy concepts as culture, communication or language.¹ Colloquial connotations force the discourse to be placed close to a public debate or a wide-ranging discussion covering important social issues. In dictionary terms, a discourse is a conversation, confabulation, dispute, exchange of opinions. These and other synonymous terms are approx. 130. Thus, semantic deliberations on discourse are inevitable. This is – obviously – not the purpose of this article.

The aim of the article is to identify one of the discursive strategies in relation to identity discourse – the strategy of invalidation in the context of different varieties of group identities. Such a task raises several obligations. Firstly, an explanation of what an identity discourse is, or what it means that a discourse serves identity. Secondly, what is identity, especially political identity, and thirdly, what are discursive strategies and what characteristics can be attributed to one of them, which I define as invalidation, described in the literature as “somebody else’s problem” (SEP).²

IDENTITY AND IDENTITY DISCOURSE

Following van Dijk, discourse will be understood through three different dimensions: the use of language, the transmission of ideas, and the interaction in social situations.³ This means that linguistic, cognitive and social aspects are distinguished in the discourse.

This approach, as noted by Horolets, [...] *allows us to see discourse as a dialectical phenomenon that extends between the spheres of individual mental models, social action and collective consciousness.*⁴ Moreover, the context plays a key role in defining the discourse, which was pointed out by van Dijk, therefore, following this path, discourse should be treated as a statement and a text in context.⁵ This contextual approach means that the utterance itself, detached from the context, is reduced to lexical conventional meanings ascribed to words, and thus devoid of social meaning. The social sense is related to the sharing of certain ideas, or, simply speaking, their dissemination. In this context, Anna Duszak points out that discourse is not a product but a process that takes place in a dynamic and controlled manner by communication participants. The author

¹ A. Horolets, *Obrazy Europy w polskim dyskursie publicznym*, Kraków 2006, p. 54.

² M. Czyżewski, K. Dunin, A. Piotrowski, “Cudze problemy, czyli wstęp do sepologii”, in Eidem (eds.), *Cudze problemy. O ważności tego, co nieważne*, Warszawa 1991, pp. 7-11.

³ T.A. van Dijk (ed.), *Dyskurs jako struktura i proces*, Warszawa 2001, p. 10.

⁴ A. Horolets, *Obrazy Europy...*, p. 54.

⁵ T.A. van Dijk (ed.), *Dyskurs...*, p. 10.

emphasizes that *discourse is not a closed system, on the contrary, it is a relation between texts and discourses that create new areas of social activity.*⁶

If we take the cited three-element discourse structure as a starting point for further considerations, it should be noted that each of these elements plays a significant role in shaping the identity discourse because it is created as a result of initiated social interactions, sustained by language, or more broadly, the communication behaviour of discourse participants.

It should be emphasized that the growing interest in discourse in its various forms and perceived from different perspectives leads to some confusion – it refers to the epistemological and methodological stratum.⁷ Considerations on the identity discourse require at least a brief introduction to the concept of identity, especially political identity.

Identity is a sociological and psychological category, and its meaning has long been of interest to other social sciences. In the most basic approach, identity is collective as a result of a shaped sense of belonging and functioning in a group, as well as the consensus achieved in it, which increases the mutual identification of group members. Then, the thinking in terms of us-them appears, which is an element of group identity.⁸

Barbara Henry proposes to define political identity as a collective way of acting and thinking of any group in relation to political institutions.⁹ Political identity is also related to the ability to define a human being as a member of a group, so it is an individual that co-creates group consciousness. Moreover, as the author notes, *political identity is something more than a simple vision of the world that includes a description of people who think about themselves when they are active in some political group. Political identity encompasses not only established values and political characteristics, but also actions that a person undertakes individually and as a group, in order to reflect on their nature and master it fully.*¹⁰

Barbara Markiewicz distinguishes three models of political identity: hard, programmed, and fuzzy, or soft.¹¹ Hard political identity characterizes people who adhere to certain ideologies, it is fundamentalist in nature and is realized through confrontation with others. The basis of this confrontation is a specific set of ideas and values. Programmed identity characterizes politicians and their supporters who focus not so much on defining themselves in accordance with the program of their formation, as on publicly manifesting specific ideas. What matters here is the image, or the media image of the grouping. Fuzzy identity – according to Markiewicz's concept – characterizes

⁶ A. Duszak, *Tekst, dyskurs, komunikacja międzykulturowa*, Warszawa 2009, p. 20.

⁷ It's not the task of this article to formulate a view on this issue.

⁸ P. Sztompka, *Sociology*, Kraków 2002, pp. 293-299.

⁹ B. Markiewicz, "Sfera publiczna a kwestia tożsamości politycznej", *Filo-Sofija*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2014), p. 78. See B. Henry, "The Role of Symbols for European Political Identity. Political Identity as Myth?", in F. Cerutti, E. Rudolph (eds.), *A Soul for Europe. On the Cultural and Political Identity of the Europeans. An Essay Collection*, vol. 2, Louvain 2001.

¹⁰ B. Henry, "Identities of the West: Reason, Myths, Limits of Tolerance", in H. Friese (ed.), *Identities. Time, Difference, and Boundaries*, New York–Oxford 2002, p. 86.

¹¹ B. Markiewicz, "Sfera publiczna...", p. 82.

groups that are interested in politics from time to time, for example, when there is a pretext for interest in the elections or socially important issues.¹² Their importance is defined on the basis of overheard opinions, the dominant message in the media, often saturated with stereotypes. If the current politics abound in spectacular events, often in the form of offences or scandals, then large sections of society have a reason to take a position on these issues, thus answering key identity questions. To these systematizations we also need to add the concept of pluralist identity by Chantal Mouffe.¹³ The author assumes that such identity is characteristic of citizens with a high degree of political awareness and civic culture. Whereby, apart from the identity models mentioned above, I distinguish another model – **reflective identity**. It is not a variant of a fuzzy, undefined identity – as one might think. Reflective identity is the result of the ability to dialogue within groups and between groups, it requires constant reflection on questions such as ‘who am I?’, ‘Who are we?’ This is because the shaping of the sense of individual and group identity is a consequence of constant accumulation of knowledge and experiences about ourselves, as well as evaluating and verifying it. It should be emphasized that reflective identity is formed on one hand, as a result of participation in the public discourse (what we say about ourselves), and on the other hand, as a result of being the subject of this discourse (what they say about us). Reflective identity is the opposite of ritualized identity, as Luhmann emphasizes it is reflexivity, being a contradiction of the ritual, that is in its essence communicative, one might say – discursive.¹⁴ Anthony Giddens has a slightly different view of reflexivity, emphasizing its pragmatic nature.¹⁵ According to him, reflexivity becomes a permanent means of control. It is about reflective control that accompanies everyday human activity. People control their actions and expect it from others. In defining reflective identity, Luhmann’s position is inspired by it, if only because of the communicative nature of reflexivity. Reflective identity is characterized by several properties: an understanding and acceptance of the complexity of the social world; an acceptance of the presence of other groups in the public space, as others become a condition for shaping the identity of one own group; an acceptance of difference as a natural feature of the social world; an ability to have a real dialogue based on factual criteria. This identity is the opposite of a hard identity.

The identity discourse is built on the basis of these models. It has its dominant features. In the case of hard identity, this discourse is closed in the sense that it only refers to emphasizing the correctness of the views adopted by a group, marginalizing the importance of other groups. The program identity model is associated with exposing the image in the media, focusing on media visibility, marketing campaigns promoting the group. In turn, the model of soft identity is characterized by a discourse saturated

¹² Ibid.

¹³ C. Mouffe, “Citizenship and Political Identity”, *October. The Identity in Question*, vol. 61 (1992), pp. 28-32.

¹⁴ N. Luhmann, *Systemy społeczne. Zarys ogólnej teorii*, Kraków 2007, p. 413.

¹⁵ A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1986, pp. 41-44.

with a high level of ambiguity that allows identification with the currently fashionable, dominant narrative. Pluralist identity, on the other hand, requires a discourse based on a rational attitude to politics, which is possible among well-informed groups who are constantly, rather than occasionally, politically involved. Reflective identity is associated with the most mature form of discourse. Its features are caution and the ability to question existing patterns of action and thinking, accompanied by intellectual activity opposed to schematic thinking. Thinking is systemic and contextual, after all. This type of discourse is inclusive and does not create barriers, but overcomes them through dialogue. Dialogue is of priority value.

The models listed are not separable, and the discourses assigned to them are not their permanent feature. As previously mentioned, a discourse is not a product but a dynamic process.

To sum up, for the purposes of these considerations, I will understand the identity discourse as one that is co-created within individual identities by politicians, various institutions, citizens, and the media. The subjects of this discourse are also groups that stand out because of their sense of separateness from others, i.e. a group with a specific, described identity. Politicians, media, and institutions mentioned here can be considered as some kind of identity-creating influence agents. Various discursive practices play an important role in this process. One of them is the practice of overturning and counter-overturning. What are their features and to what extent can they create communication strategies that are important in the identity discourse?

SOMEBODY ELSE'S PROBLEM – THAT IS, INVALIDATION

The authors of the book *Somebody Else's Problems* discuss the importance of what is 'unimportant', and point out that a democratic society creates a chance for everyone to express their views. However, despite this opportunity, some problems arise as people and their views are marginalised in the public sphere. A feature of public communication is the invalidation of certain issues in the public discourse – the authors conclude.¹⁶

Therefore, it can be assumed that invalidation is a category referring to the process of public communication, that considers some part of public discourse as invalid or a matter that is somebody else's problem.¹⁷

The SEP category appears – *somebody else's problem*. What does this mean? The authors themselves point out that *this is a matter that has not been mentioned, or one for which we have no linguistic categories. [...] Sepology is a field of research on the importance of what is unimportant, on various ways of invalidation, that is, practices of invalidation.*¹⁸

Revocation is particularly diverse, it can be understood as concealment of what is important in social life, the absence of discourse, or the lack of public expression of

¹⁶ M. Czyżewski, K. Dunin, A. Piotrowski, *Cudze problemy...*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

certain incidents.¹⁹ Due to the fact that the authors introduce the category of revocation to research public discourse, they argue that *it is socially and politically important, it shows what matters, and how people are subject to invalidation*.²⁰

In the semantic circle of invalidations, apart from being silent and absent, there are also: elimination of issues, their marginalization, omission, neglect, or depreciation. The above-mentioned activities are communicative in nature and are in fact tools through which invalidation is effected. A more detailed analysis with examples provides a contribution to the invalidation study.

Meanwhile, shaping collective identities is associated with assigning social importance, attention, emphasizing the role of various social phenomena, public affairs, or facts. In terms of identity, the creative character is actually inventing issues that can create identity. Disseminating views, articulating reasons, aspirations, interests and expectations is the essence of the political message through which political goals are achieved. Czyżewski and co-authors would call it counter-revocation (“sepization”) practices. This means that publicizing certain issues is accompanied by marginalization and cancellation of others revocation (“sepization”). In the quoted book we read [...] *every act of nullifying a matter is necessarily accompanied by giving importance to other matters, that is, counter-revocation (“sepization”)*.²¹

In its communicative dimension, public discourse is a process in which a game is played for what is important in a given political and economic situation, for example what is worth being publicised, which matters need to be emphasized, and which should be marginalised, omitted, i.e. considered unimportant.

WHY WE NULLIFY, THAT IS, ON SOCIAL SOURCES OF NULLIFICATION²²

One of the manifestations of invalidating thinking is the formulation of judgments based on ready-made formulas stored in memory, taken from the newspaper language and slogans. This kind of shortcut has its origins in the properties of the human mind.²³ Limited attention capacity means that a person cannot cope with the huge and constantly growing amount of information available at any moment. Therefore, a person has to select the incoming information. Mental capacity allows you to think only about a few things at a time. A feature of the political world is the fast pace of events. Man is not always ready to scrutinize them. Consequently, he needs simplified thought strategies to be able to take a position on certain events. These simple ways of understanding the world with minimal

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² E.M. Marciniak, “Polityka jako sztuka unieważniania”, in B. Kaczmarek (ed.), *Metafory polityki 2*, Warszawa 2003, pp. 156-166.

²³ R.B. Cialdini, *Psychologia społeczna*, Gdańsk 2002, ch. 3.

mental effort allow for the formulation of judgments, making decisions in a situation where information is not consciously processed. The result of this shortcut thinking (also called heuristic thinking) is the use of cognitive schemas in which generalized knowledge about the social world, including the past experiences of an individual, is written. This means, that thinking on politics will largely be a function of the content of cognitive schemas. It is easy to imagine people whose experience in the field of political life is limited, negatively, hence the specific content of their schema may favour the invalidation of political matters. We use heuristics most often when there is not enough time to carefully think about the problem, when we are overloaded with information. An important reason for the use of heuristics is the lack of knowledge in a given field, and when the issues in which we are to make decisions and formulate an opinion, are not very important. These, in fact, objective sources of annulment, relegating to the background in the hierarchy of importance of certain problems should be seen as a natural phenomenon, not being an intentional, deliberate procedure of depriving validity.

COMMON THINKING ABOUT POLITICS

Politics is an area where various beliefs clash, often in a dichotomous approach to phenomena, which leads to a polarization of standpoints. Polarization often concerns matters bordering on politics and morality and politics and customs. Common-sense thinking "in layman's terms" appears where authority is not enough, or where authorities "mess with the head". Colloquial thinking is ambiguous and tautological.²⁴

As Berger points out, by adopting an everyday attitude we avoid philosophical suspicion towards cognition.²⁵ We want to know why something is happening only when the knowledge of the causes is a necessary component of the technique of dealing with reality of the situation. We are usually content with any hypothesis as long as it provides simple directives. Due to the demand for simplicity, common man displaces anything that might disturb his classifications. We prefer to perceive everything that surrounds us as a continuation of the inevitable order of nature, rather than to feel that the world could look completely different. Common-sense thinking is the result of experience, practical knowledge that every person has regardless of experience, education, or individual abilities. In an etymological sense, it is associated with balanced, practical, and transparent thinking. Hence the specific social acceptance for the characteristics of thinking described in this way. However, as confirmed by common sense, experience does not have to be socially useful, especially in some areas of social life. Politics is one of them. Here experience might tell you 'It is not worth talking about X issues, because nothing is going to change anyway'. This half-truth leads, in consequence, to the absence of socially important issues. Unspoken, they become absent from the political space and maybe just as important as those that the media talk about in every news service.

²⁴ E.M. Marciniak, "Polityka jako sztuka unieważniania...", p. 158.

²⁵ Cit. per: T. Hołówka, *Myslenie potoczne. Heterogeniczność zdrowego rozsądku*, Warszawa 1986, p. 161.

CANCELLATION PRACTICES

It can be assumed that within individual identities the space of public discourse is filled with something important, and as a result, a more or less extensive community is built, based on convergent “importance” on one hand, and cancelled events and contents on the other hand. The important and the unimportant clash in these discourses. In the discursive space, there is a dispute about the hierarchy of importance of matters, or otherwise – a dispute about various importance and nullity.

In this dispute, specific procedures are used, creating specific communication strategies through which practices of invalidation are carried out within individual and collective identities.

The authors of *Someone Else's Problems* propose to distinguish two main types of revocation practices – silent and articulated revocation, i.e. “sepization”.²⁶ With regard to the former, they point out that it is a practice by omission, and therefore it is a hidden practice that manifests itself in the absence of signs, gestures, or expressions. So, how do you discover the meaning of something that is not spoken? The way to discover it is to analyse the context, thanks to which you can find out what this silent revocation, or “sepization”, is.

The lack of public expression of phenomena in communication acts is achieved through silence. Silence, or concealment, are practices that happen through abandonment, absence, and tabooing various issues. Both in terms of content and functionality, silence is a conscious suspension of communicating something to someone with words. In the first case we remain silent in order to not say something, in the second, to revoke speech, not to say anything, notes Izydora Dąmbska.²⁷

Therefore, silence can be understood as non-speech resulting from intentionally refraining from using verbal language, and concealment in its two characters. One is eliminating, i.e. choosing the presented elements of reality from a selection of those that were considered important, the other is ignoring the irrelevant and postulating, i.e. concealment requiring reconstruction and supplementation, left to the reader's perspicacity and leading to the narrowing of a communication channel.²⁸

Silence, in its invalidating aspect, can be called a kind of an escape from words. This is understood as a result of avoiding social relations, both individual and intergroup. This avoidance occurs in situations that are defined as unfavourable or anticipated to have negative consequences. It is therefore a manifestation of a defensive attitude in communication. Sometimes this absence is caused by strategic actions, when the public discourse. Therefore, it is an important means in the fight and cooperation of various groups that binds a specific identity. Additionally, Czyżewski and co-authors emphasize other practices of silent revocation. They are said to result from the lack of

²⁶ Cit. per: T. Hołówka, *Myslenie potoczne...*, pp. 11-14.

²⁷ I. Dąmbska, “Milczenie jako wyraz i wartość”, *Roczniki Filozoficzne*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1963).

²⁸ S. Sierotwiński, *Słownik terminów literackich*, Wrocław 1986, pp. 156, 198.

linguistic categories to describe reality or the blurring of certain experiences, events in memory, by simply forgetting them.²⁹

The second practice of revocation is the articulated revocation – that is, invalidation expressed in communication acts.³⁰ These communication acts, both in the content and the relational layer, are saturated with negative connotations, for example, marginalization, stigmatization, depreciation, exclusion, degradation.³¹ There are communication procedures, the use of which leads to an invalidating discourse. Revocation practices refer not only to the descriptive layer, but also to the axiological and evaluative layer. This means that there is a specific “operation” on values and judgments.

For example, patriotism, as a result of revocation practices, is an attitude of love for the homeland, as long as it is a conservative patriotism, or a blind patriotism, while constructive patriotism, not associated with any ideology, becomes a defective or even an undesirable patriotism. It is not only about changing the meaning but also changing the valuation. The morally neutral concept of “left” is not only replaced with the notion of “leftism” but is also additionally negatively burdened by axiology. Moralized abortion is becoming primarily an ethical, rather than medical, issue related to women's health and life.

Articulated nullification practices use the contrast effect. It means referring to treatments that highlight the differences. It is a conscious manipulation of various features of the subjects being combined in order to obtain the desired interpretative advantage, resulting from the possibility of formulating arguments and difficulties in formulating counter-arguments. For example, a discussion of what Polishness versus Europeaness is may be an element of the identity discourse, but reduced to stereotypical Polish hospitality and stereotypical Scottish greed, it is an evident manifestation of revocation.

Stereotyping somewhat relieves the requirement of a detailed analysis of specific features of an object, and assigns to it those that it does not actually have or forgoes to recognize its real characteristics at all. Stereotype as a “ready form of thinking” is characterised by schematic and rigid thinking. This means that if there are certain stereotypes of various groups or political parties in social circulation, e.g. that they are parochial and anti-Polish, then regardless of the moral features, mental characteristics, or fitness of individual people (group members or a party from the social stereotype). Stereotype is therefore a tool for depersonalizing individuals and not recognizing their individuality.

Another practice of articulated invalidation is the tendency to view phenomena dichotomously. Black-white, good-bad evaluation is a typical procedure polarizing the discussion. Of course, white is important and black is not important because it is worse, sometimes unfashionable, and sometimes politically incorrect. There are usually two perspectives of viewing things, e.g. European and national, liberal and conservative,

²⁹ M. Czyżewski, K. Dunin, A. Piotrowski, *Cudze problemy...*, p. 12.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³¹ The relational layer of the message reflects the emotional relationship of the sender to the recipient, described, for example, in terms of approval vs disapproval, kindness vs hostility.

Catholic and secular. Polarization runs not only along the lines of ideological orientations, but also it may concern the issue of values, the sphere of morality, or customs.

COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES AND REVOCATION PRACTICES

At the end of these considerations, it is worth posing the problem of invalidating practices characteristic of different identities.

The specific criteria used to marginalize matters within individual identities are complex. They are of a temporal nature and are related to the dynamics of political and cultural changes, which result in the re-ordering of important and unimportant matters. Redefinition of the hierarchy of importance in individual groups can be deep and it touches upon fundamental issues. It is interesting what and by whom certain groups are invalidated in collective discourses characteristic of individual identities. The answer to this question seems to have a twofold formula. On one hand, it is worth noting that irrespective of the type of identity of the practice, invalidation is present in communication practices. However, in some cases, identity-specific invalidation practices can be identified. For a hard identity, such a practice is to invalidate dialogue as a method of intergroup communication. So, it is silent revocation. It is connected with the temptation of radical annulment, and then the conversation and dialogue are suspended. This suspension occurs as a result of the exhaustion of mutual ties and the inability to find a common ground. This means that invalidating silence becomes a negative consequence of the lack of dialogue.³² Overruling dialogue also promotes power as a means of resolving disputes. Unfortunately, the history of mankind is not a history of negotiation, compromise, and dialogue. It is full of forceful solutions resulting from invalidating actions. Practices of articulated revocation, mainly depreciation of others, marginalization of other groups, or their stereotyping, are also characteristic of hard identity.

Somewhat at the other extreme of the collective identities discussed, there is a pluralistic and reflective identity. It should be noted that the constitutive feature of these identities are disputes over validity and nullity. In these discourses, important and invalid issues clash, they coexist, sometimes changing places. The line between what is important and what is invalid is the result of the ability to initiate and maintain dialogue.

A pluralistic and reflective discourse is not a space for the victory of a single idea surrounded by invalidated ideas. To invalidate other ideas or problems is to deprive public discourse of its democratic character, to create a monopoly on validity, and a monopoly of one truth. Dynamic reality requires recognizing the difference and seeing its positive qualities. But it takes intellectual effort and a willingness to make it.

³² J. Mizińska, *Sztuka prowadzenia sporów. Aksjologiczne przesłanki dialogu*, Lublin 1993, p. 47.

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