

**Vesna Trifunovic**

Institute of Ethnography SASA, Belgrade  
vesnita@eunet.rs

## **Post-Socialist Transformation and New Forms of Identification in the Serbian Society\***

Post-socialist transformation in Serbia has introduced various changes and novelties including a formation of special categories of losers and winners of transition. The parameters defining these categories allow a possibility of identification with either one within the society. This paper presents analytical terms appropriate for discussing the given identification, as well as problems associated with it, further pointing out to the complexity of this issue. The categories of losers and winners of transition are ever-lasting, accompanying a process of social transformation itself. This however does not imply they are irrelevant considering they represent a sense of self and others in time characterized by important economic, political and cultural turbulences.

*Key words:*

identity, identification, transition, losers, winners

### **Introduction**

A process of post-socialist transformation is a specific time of crisis, "with unrest being present in all segments of life, ravaging all established schemes but still incapable of establishing new ones" (Golubović 1999). A search for an identity then assumes an answer to the question: what is the real nature of the relationship between an individual and the society? This process is also manifested in formation of new forms of identification, construction of new societal relations, understandings and perceptions. A good example is the emerging of new categories of losers and winners of transition. Namely, during the process of post-socialist transformation in Serbia, a new system of evaluation emerged with a primary goal to label the society members as either losers or winners of these particular societal conditions. Under the term post-socialist transformation in Serbia, I assume two subsequent

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time periods, one known as the so-called first transition or blocked transformation (1989–2000) and the other as the so-called true transition or late transformation from 2000 and lasting (Kovačević 2006, Lazić et al. 2004). From the very beginning, the post-socialist transformation has been developing in ways that supported the societal evaluation to create representations about the two constant categories of losers and winners. The categories depended on variable social, political and economic conditions, placing thus different social layers and individuals within one or the other. A winner or loser of the transition implies, in simple words, a person either muddling through successfully or not coping well in the process of general societal changes, i.e., in the first place, a person's economic success and/or rise in social status, or economic plunge and status degradation. Hence, there should be clear parameters in measuring winners or losers, which have influenced the formation of the separate categories and identification with either one.

In this paper, my intention is to emphasize adequate analytical concepts to address issues of identification with the categories of transition, as well as to point out to certain problems accompanying these issues. This could allow furthermore a review about an important aspect the society is using in understanding the categories of transition: a personal position, that is, self-understanding regarding the question. Formulated in this way, the problem further points out to identity as an important analytical term for discussion, especially so if the term is understood as an awareness of individual about his/hers typical features, acquired through social and cultural processes (Прелић 2008, 25). Moreover, identity notion is frequently being formed based on the opposition principle, when the individual or group features are defined in regards to features of other individuals or groups (Dundes 1993, 7). This implies we should accept subjectivity as a construction formed by both self-identification and identification by social environment (Mead 2003).

The notion of identity is expressed through various forms, levels and meanings hence, generally speaking, there are three dominant levels wherein identity appears as an important operative concept, and these are: individual, group and society (Halpern 2009). Due to these different levels, various perspectives have been formed to discuss the problem of identity such as philosophical, psychological, sociological or anthropological perspectives. Each has offered a separate definition and understanding of the given term and each has placed an emphasis to either individuals or community. In addition, these perspectives theories are often opposed to one another hence there are many ambivalent meanings of identity disallowing so an acceptance of a single definition which would satisfy the need to define this problem as a category of analysis.

One of the most important distinctions between psychological and sociological perspectives regards the question of whether identity is to be understood as immanent and fixed or as attributed and formed in accordance with variables and circumstances. "Contrary to psychologists lead by Erikson who incline to the first definition, sociologists perceive identity as a product between an individual and his/hers society, wherein self is not firm, given entity but a process constantly being created and re-created in every social situation an individual encounters" (Gleason 1983, 918). Dilemmas of the similar type, ambiguities and *identity paradoxes*

(Đurić 2010, Mark 2009), as well as theoretical burden associated with it, have lead some authors to question identity's analytical value and potential:

We argue that the prevailing constructivist stance on identity – the attempt to “soften” the term, to acquit it of the charge of “essentialism” by stipulating that identities are constructed, fluid, and multiple-leaves us without a rationale for talking about “identities” at all and ill-equipped to examine the “hard” dynamics and essentialist claims of contemporary identity politics... If identity is everywhere, it is nowhere (Braubaker et al. 2000, 1)

Under “soft” and “hard” identity conceptions, Braubaker and Cooper (2000) assume two antagonistic approaches, the first emphasizing fundamental and solid sameness while the other rejects understanding about basic sameness- these approaches are known as essentialist and constructivist approaches. In essence, these authors question acceptance of identity as a category of analysis due to its wide ranged, opposed and antagonistic meanings. Furthermore, they criticize conceptions of identity which are usually saturated with typical qualifiers implying identity is “multiple, unstable, in flux, contingent, fragmented, constructed, negotiated, and so on”, making thus the conceptions of identity too weak to be useful in theoretical work (Braubaker et al. 2000, 11). In addition, they propose a different set of factors participating in identity formation, to be considered, grouped in three batches: identification and categorization, self-understanding and social location and lastly, connectedness, sameness and commonality. These groups are actually made of important processes in social life in everyday and various situations. I will omit a deeper analysis of justification regarding these concepts versus rejection of analytical category of identity, but will just point out that the proposed concepts appear as well defined and suitable for discussion about the categories of losers and winner in the transition. Moreover, this paper will focus on the concepts of self-identification and self-understanding since they appear as the best tool to investigate the special aspect of the losers and winners of the transition, i.e., an individual position and his/hers self-perception within these categories.

The term identification requires to specify the agents that do the identifying, and in this sense, it could be applied to an individual who is doing self-identification through one's own self categorization, locating one self thus in regards to others or into the appropriate category; or, it could imply identification by others. Ways of identification by oneself and by others may greatly vary from context to context; in addition, the two identifications do not have to overlap necessarily (Braubaker et al. 2000, 14).

Regarding losers and winners of the transition, this implies a person who, for instance, identifies with the category of losers, but does not have to be in the same way identified by his/hers own environment. Related to this problem is another specific form of identification, known as categorization: a person may identify oneself or others by membership in a class of persons sharing some categorical attributes, such as gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and so on. This identification is achieving ever greater importance in modern times (Braubaker et al. 2000,

14). Another form of identification is relational, assuming locatedness of an individual within a network of diverse relations, such as kin, business, friendly etc. In fact, these analytical notions allow an insight into features and characteristics leading an individual to identify oneself or to be identified as a loser or winner of the transition, that is, to be (self) placed in one or the other category, implying directly to their general social conceptualization.

Self-understanding designates a perception an individual has about oneself, one's social location, and of how one is to act depending of the first two. It is a cognitive and emotional perception a person has about of oneself and the surrounding social world ((Braubaker et al. 2000, 17). Self-understanding, in this sense does not imply a homogeneous and given entity but can take many forms depending on various factors and social processes. It is therefore important to perceive self-understanding and social locatedness in relation to each other, and to emphasize the culturally specific nature rather than universal form. Actually, two closely related terms are self-representation and self-identification. The difference is, according to Braubaker et al (2000, 18), self-understandings may be tacit, while self-identification suggest at least some degree of explicit discursive articulation. This term implies subjectivity and variability, taken as a weakness when alternating identity concept often associated with duration and objectivity. In this case, the concept of self-understanding is still adequate and applicable, given that the categories of losers and winners of the transition are ephemeral, that is, recognizable exclusively in the time period of general social transformation. Additionally, at various times during the transformation, these categories serve various individuals for self-evaluation.

Regardless of the analytical adequacy and value of the concepts of self-identification, identification and self-understanding in classifying into the categories of losers and winners, in this particular case, there are specific relations between them making self-perception of an individual considerably complex regarding the two. In this process, several problems arise but I will discuss them only briefly.

Identification of losers and winners of the transition includes two different but connected levels: one is objective (scientific) serving to perceive social levels or even professions and the other one is individual. Sociological studies have shown that the part of winners in the period of blocked transition came from political nomenclature, and they had converted political into economic capital and hence became entrepreneurs. Losers from this same period belong to middle urban classes, mostly clerks, experts in state enterprises, small scale entrepreneurs but also members of the lower classes such as workers, unemployed and pensioners. During the late transformation though, the systemic changes contributed to economic improvement of the middle urban class but not to the poor and lower classes and many other employed workers in factories and productions (Lazić et. al 2004, 2006, 2008).

On the one hand, this is about the objective measurements influencing identification of certain social class with losers and winners of the transition. On the other hand, even though statistics show for example, an improvement of the middle

urban class standard of living in the period of late transformation, a member of that particular category does not necessarily have to identify with the winners of transition and could, for one reason or another, consider him/herself neutral or loser regarding this issue. This brings us to the second level of identification designated as individual and subjective, dependable on personal perception and the according value system the individual in question holds. That is, this level includes self-identification, identification by environment and self-understanding, all conditioned by the mentioned objective measures but also the existing value systems (Kokotović et al. 2004) and styles of understanding of the society (Antonijević 2009, 268).

General usage of the term identification often assumes having one or more identities and clinging to the same. The process starts by marking and designating that participate in self-understanding building, conditioned to a large extent by a support from the environment (Foote 1951, 17). This term also implies an emotional merging of an individual with others, most often at the level of societal values and attitudes (Allport 1954, 293). The question of identification with losers or winners of the transition may appear simpler than it really is. It is clear the categories assume appropriate living standard, social status and economic power or powerlessness. Considering these measurements, we may safely assume the categories to be closely connected with classes. This is where one should pay close attention to separate levels which may be included into a certain class that is, about inter-class complexity and fragmentation, originated from homogeneity reduction during the post-socialist transformation of the Serbian society (Lazić 1996, Lazić et. al 2004, 2008).

In fact, losers and winners of the transitions could be found among diverse social levels and hence within different classes implying the categories are considerably heterogeneous. Often, media report on unemployed persons having university education, or working in low paid jobs or being inadequately valued within their occupation. So, a highly qualified person, due to economic degradation, shares living standard and economic possibilities with, for instance, workers having much less school. However, even persons having middle or even low educational levels do not have to be classified into loser category, considering the fact they could also be successful entrepreneurs. This situation is recognized in the Serbian society and was a subject of many television shows. This is a citation reflecting on the issue from a B92 forum participant, July 2010, confirming further the situation present on both levels:

Does someone remember a show called “Gore-Dole”, aired some 15 years ago...In one of the episodes, a graduated molecular biologist (played by Nikola Kojo) is looking for a job in a drugstore. He is received by the ignorant owner, his mouth full of food and golden chains around his neck. The owner asks the biologist how much weight he can lift, and upon hearing about his qualifications, the owner rejects him. This must have been written by Nostradamus. ([http://www6.b92.net/biz/komentari.php?nav\\_id=447068](http://www6.b92.net/biz/komentari.php?nav_id=447068)).

Both categories so can include individuals of various occupations, with educational level being the most variable given that an individual can work outside his/hers profession but the level of education remains constant regardless of the employment activity, as shown by the previous forum example. Also, it is important to mention age spectrum, ranging from students to pensioners. At this point I should say that the categories include independent individuals capable of earnings, that is, persons who possess an active relationship towards the existing social conditions, facing directly job hunting, profession degradation or possibility of professional and/or economic improvement. Younger generations, pensioners and others are left out but this does not imply they are exempted from the transformation. Such heterogeneous categories of losers and winners surely merge different value systems and attitudes as important referent frameworks for understanding and acting, which all make identification a very problematic issue. This diversity is at the same time, a source of tension among self-understanding, self-identification and identification by environment.

In addition to this diversity, other sources of tension are value implications within these same terms. Hence, a loser, in cognitive awareness, carries a negative connotation implying failure, incompetence and incapability, contrary to a winner, connected with opposite positively connoted characteristics. The given concepts regard societal success, thus significantly influence the process of identification and individuals who perceive themselves as either losers or winners, allowing deviation between self-understanding and self-identification. As pointed out before, self-understanding is mostly tacit and personal while self-identification is explicit and could be seen as an image an individual wishes to form about oneself within the society. This could mean such individual will not publicly announce and identify as a loser despite perhaps he/she sees himself/herself in exact such way. An explanation of this could be found in Goffman (2000, 26), who argues a society is organized so that each individual, possessing certain societal features has a moral right to expect the others to value and behave accordingly. Moreover, an individual tends to present an ideal impression about oneself, in an attempt to participate in officially accepted societal values (ibid, 48). Since in the majority of societies there is an idealization of higher status and aspiration of the lower status people to achieve the higher status, this in fact represents a desire for position close as much as possible to the grand centre of general societal values (ibid, 49).

One should also pay a close attention to diverse value systems and understanding systems closely connected with the problem of conceptualization of losers and winners of the transition. They are especially emphasized through societal typization (Klapp 1962) of various value implications, wherein the positive ones do not refer exclusively to winners nor negative ones to losers. A tycoon, controversial businessman and criminal are surely good indicators of the previous, as negative notions sometimes associated with the transition winners, originated from the social context itself and conditions surrounding it. In accordance with this, there are cases emphasizing an inadequate moral of the winners and cases wherein a loser does not have to carry a negative connotation. In fact, studies about losers and winners of the transition presented within popular culture, show that those who belong to the cate-

gories are not always measured by economic success or failure but also in accordance with their respective professional and private lives. This points out to a lot more complex representation about losers and winners than the one taking into account economic standing solely (Trifunović 2009). In cases like this, one's social status does not have to overlap with one's economic power. This further confirms the categories of transition are also imposed categories, that is, identification and typization, formed within different discourses, which the environment sometimes creates regardless of an individual's will.

Connected to heterogeneity of the categories of losers and winners, and the already mentioned value implications, are also separate social comparisons as mechanisms of constructing images of oneself, at the levels of inter-group, intra-group and intra-individual (Martino 2009, 59). This means that losers and winners of the transition are not being evaluated exclusively based on inter-group comparisons, when a member of either category compares with one or more persons classified into the opposing category. Even more so, intra-group comparison – when a member of a wider group is being compared with the rest of the group members – emerges as equally important due to the mentioned diversity found within these categories. So, for example, it is possible to find both negative and positive typizations within these categories. In addition, there is also intra-individual level, wherein an individual compares past events and issues or what may happen in the future. This level testifies about self-perception in time and allows a possibility of comparison between the two transitional periods at the level of individual, playing at the same time, an important role in the process of self-understanding. Value implications carried by the categories of losers and winners and their connection with measurements of societal success, strongly determine motives directing organization of self-images.

For example, such is a motif of self-assessment allowing an individual to establish and maintain a positive image of one self. Social psychologists consider that an average successful individual will compare himself/herself with others who are less successful (Martino 2009, 55). The next motif, self-verification, assumes an effort to maintain a relatively stable and coherent image of oneself, by choosing, reading and favoring information confirming the image. Individuals, namely, happily and selectively use information in accordance with the previously created opinions about themselves in time and situations. Hence, they could strive to undermine a credibility of a person who strikes them back with an opposite image to their images (ibid), which could be reflected in a negative typization of the transition winners, through, for example, a type representing a criminal. This is certainly connected with a social context of transition development and important criminalization of the society, especially in the period of the first transition. On the other hand, individuals are known to undermine themselves in their efforts to objectively assess their own values. This often, is incomplete and just confirms further already formed image about oneself. Another important motif is to improve oneself, one's potentials, abilities and well being. Often, individuals then compare themselves with persons who were in the same or similar situations, and later on, made an improvement (ibid). Taken together, these motives are marked as a doubtful system of informa-

tion processing since they to a large extent, also include manipulation and distorted information. All the above point out that these motives have an important influence on to processes of self-understanding and self-identification as well as on deviation that may appear between them.

Tensions and discordance among self-understanding, self-identification and identification made by environment confirm the complexity of the problem of an individual identification with losers and winners of the transition. These specific associations among the given analytical terms could be understood if we take into account the emphasized heterogeneity of these categories and accompanying bounded value implications. Identification with one or the other category is thus determined to a great deal by the mentioned levels of comparisons and motives of organization of oneself, performing in accordance with different value and understanding systems. Based on these, a conclusion could be drawn which points out that the personal aspect in perceiving losers and winners of the transition, that is, self-understanding, is very complex having to merge together the mentioned oppositions and tensions. Ways of accomplishing all these are an interesting subject for future research and represent a separate subject requiring a new paper.

For now, I argue that positioning into one or the other categories has an important influence on perception and self-perception of an individual. The categories of losers and winners are interesting because they make a specific form of identification in a certain period, such as transition. In this sense, they are ephemeral categories since they last as long as the process of social transformation. This does not make them less relevant, considering they represent awareness about oneself, and others in a time period characterized by important social, economic, political and cultural turbulences.

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