Sociology of the stumbling-block: A profile of Alessandro Pizzorno

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‘But he has nothing on!’ Throughout his career, the Italian sociologist Alessandro Pizzorno’s sophisticated and penetrating sociological analysis has laid bare the shortcomings of the theoretical ‘new clothes’ woven by methodological individualism out of concepts of ‘individual’, ‘interest’, ‘decision’. As well as articulating Pizzorno’s critique, this article aims to draw attention to the substantial and skilfully designed suit of theoretical clothes in which he has dressed the naked emperor. Pizzorno calls on sociologists to pay particular attention to processes of mutual recognition and attribution of identity: these processes, Pizzorno argues, give standards of value to the individuals involved, who are seen as ‘jealous of their reputation’ rather than as utility maximisers.

Keywords: identity; recognition; interest; collective action

Introduction

The recent publication of Il velo della diversità. Studi su razionalità e riconoscimento (The Veil of Diversity: Essays on Rationality and Recognition) provides an opportunity to re-examine the Italian sociologist Alessandro Pizzorno’s thirty-year theoretical itinerary. This is the career of a sociologist who sought to renew the language of the social sciences by introducing themes of identity and recognition – terms in the vocabulary of the social sciences that had hardly been reviewed or developed since the immediate postwar period. In the course of Pizzorno’s long theoretical journey, his curiosity has been aroused by the ‘problem of diversity’, which has been fundamental to the growth of knowledge within the social sciences. Theoretical innovation in the social sciences is triggered by the ‘stumbling-block’: by the researcher’s surprise at the existence of events, practices, beliefs that escape definition by the network of meaning that underpins everyday life, but nevertheless need to be understood as making sense. This experience in turn produces a demand for new justifications of society’s ways of thinking, to which the researcher can respond through a careful operation of reconstruction, informed by the specificities of the social situations involved. Pizzorno’s social science aims for an understanding of the foreign: a renewal of the idea of normality, having come to terms with the diversity of others and defined rationality in accordance with a situational model of research.1

Pizzorno’s work focuses on the encounter with the foreign as ‘a metaphor for the formation of social situations’: an ‘evolving social relation’ between native and foreigner, in which the lack of shared reference points obliges each to attribute a specific identity to
the other in order to make interaction possible. Indeed, it is confrontation with the other
that produces the ‘stumbling-block’: the tear in the secure fabric of interpersonal and
institutional networks, showing up the ‘vulnerability of our relationships with others
hidden beneath the veil of everyday reality’, which social research has the power to
overcome (Pizzorno 2007c, 285). Interest in the foreign, in the meeting between the native
and the alien, has led Pizzorno to ‘abandon large-scale maps and try instead to follow
paths to small clearings in the forest where we find, not gargantuan systems and mythic
narratives, but rather the smallest forms of interpersonal social behaviour . . . where we can
watch the evolution of micro-departures from the state of nature’ (Pizzorno 2007a, 26).2
Pizzorno has abandoned the ‘big, all-embracing meta-narratives’ sociology has
traditionally relied upon, to dedicate himself to microsociological analysis and to
establishing its relationships with macro-analysis. This approach to research is attentive to
the stumbling-blocks that tear the veil of day-to-day normality and to the processes of
attribution of meaning through which society continually reweaves that veil, redrawing the
maps that were disrupted by the encounter with difference.

This is a tremendously productive framework for studying the mechanisms for
re-establishing social order in a modern world, which ‘encounters a growing number of
situations of alien-ness’, infiltrated into the familiar configuration of the social landscape.
By making a theoretical springboard of the ‘stumbling-block’, Pizzorno’s sociology
provides modernity, which constantly produces experiences of otherness, with the most
effective means to interpret the fluid dissolution and reformation of those collective
identities that offer the individual reliable reference points.

From industrial action to the need for recognition: The journey begins

During his research activities on trade union mobilisation in the 1970s, Pizzorno became
aware of the inadequacy of the idea of shared economic interests as an explanation for the
process of constructing social movements that were capable of collective action (Pizzorno
1980c, 1993g).3 Empirical observation of forms of union action that did not appear to be
aimed at improving salaries or working conditions prompted a conceptual innovation:
Pizzorno distinguishes between claim-based industrial action and industrial action, which
neither presents specific demands on behalf of the workforce nor aims to maximise
individual earnings, but requests that a union that is in the process of organising should be
recognised and invited to the negotiating table. Study of union activity leads Pizzorno to
distinguish between action with a precise objective and action ‘which is a precondition of
the former, appearing as the basis for the constitution of a collective identity – in other
words, for the constitution of an active collective subject which will be in a position to set
its own goals’ (Pizzorno 2000, 200).

When action is aimed at forming a new collective identity and its recognition by other,
already constituted, collective entities, actions that may seem ‘irrational’ in terms of
individual cost-benefit analysis (such as the adoption of polarised positions or unrealistic
objectives, or stressing ideological coherence) ‘are clarified if we realise that the implicit
objective is that of creating solidarity, which will then be the basis for the formation of a
collective identity. In such actions, expressive action replaces instrumental action’
(Pizzorno 1993g, 228). Creation of an identity is a non-negotiable objective for groups
seeking recognition; in fact it is a precondition for any subsequent exchanges and
negotiations, in which collective actors take part only after defining a lasting identity to which future costs and benefits can be allocated. The history of trade unionism, moreover, has demonstrated that recognition – the attribution of identity by others who hold the ‘terrible power of identification’ – takes precedence over the development of a collective consciousness by members of a group who recognise one another as capable of collective action, from which in turn a permanent identity eventually develops.

A study of the process by which new collective identities are formed by groups excluded from union representation reveals a situation in which Olson’s theory of collective action can be seen to be suspended. Collective action proceeds according to a rationality – that of the formation and confirmation of identity – which differs from the individual, utilitarian calculation considered by Olson (1965). In the phase of formation of collective identity there is no contradiction between individual interest and participation in collective action because individuals do not yet possess the basis (the identity) on which to evaluate costs and benefits: their sole objective is to create their own identity by participating in the struggle of a collective subject demanding the recognition of its own identity. In this case the opportunistic course of free riding – taking advantage of public benefits produced by collective action while avoiding the cost of participation – would amount to remaining without recognition.4

From interest to identity, from decision to interaction: A critique of rational choice theory

His trade union studies enabled Pizzorno to introduce into sociological debate concepts of identity and recognition: ideas better suited to explaining social action than the idea of self-interest, which he criticises as methodologically unproductive.5 The relationship between identity, recognition and utility is at the centre of successive studies by Pizzorno, which emphasise the concept of ‘situational comprehension’ in order to reconstruct the social significance of an action, in direct opposition to the methodological individualism that informs the theory of rational choice.

For Pizzorno, the success of rational choice theory can be attributed to its ease of communication; this is due to its simple reproduction of the assumptions of everyday life and of the commonsense argument that each individual will act in their own interests. Pizzorno (1989a, 181–2) observes that ‘the aim of individualistic methodologies seems to be to reduce our understanding to that which is possessed by the individual actors themselves. For this approach, the goal of an investigation into particular events is to “reduce them to the familiar”’. It cannot be denied that this aim contains within it a genuine requirement: the need to consider that every individual actor, whoever he or she may be and whatever their cultural context, makes choices which respond to a certain type of rationality’. Yet it is its very closeness to ordinary life that constitutes the main defect in this theory. It fails to explain how social relationships create the cognitive familiarity so typical of ordinary day-to-day life, and how each individual, together with their co-actors, define the identities that determine their interests and ensure the predictability and intelligibility of action and cooperation.

Pizzorno distances himself from an individualistic view of society; he does not conceive of society as a function of individual goals produced exogenously (i.e., prior to social experience). Rather, he argues for a social theory, based on the idea that a relationship of reciprocal recognition is fundamental to society, ‘which attributes the significance of
action not to the unobservable intentions of individual agents, but to interpersonal (and as such public) comprehension of the action’ (Pizzorno 2000, 227). Careful theoretical reflection shows that ‘intentions gain meaning only when they are communicated and interpreted, which takes place in the course of interaction with others’ (Pizzorno 1996a, 131). Social reality can be explained not by studying decisions, but by observing interactive processes such as the reciprocal attribution of identity that takes place in social situations. Individual action takes its bearing from the intersubjectively shared framework of meaning produced by the identifying structures within which the individual acts: ‘[B]eing free to choose our actions is not the same as being free to make them mean whatever we want. This can only happen in Wonderland. The meaning of our actions is conditioned by our social identity, and this is produced by the recognition granted to it in the social circles in which we move’ (Pizzorno 1989c, 142–3).

The basic flaw in the theory of rational choice is to use individual choices as the unit of analysis, omitting to problematise the reality of the social relations that precede the individual’s action of choosing. Pizzorno opposes the individualistic concept of ‘social order’ typical of the tradition of thought originated by Hobbes (1651):

[T]he fiction of individuals not yet involved in social relations but originally knowing what their interests are and what the consequences of their choices can be is discarded in favour of a view in which the interaction between persons mutually recognizing their right to exist is the only originally conceivable reality. No pre-established interests are imagined. The individual human agent is constituted as such when he is recognized and named by other human agents. (Pizzorno 1991, 220–1)

Every individual has a fundamental need: self-preservation. In order for self-preservation to become a motive for action, value must be attributed to the self. To value the self presupposes a relationship with other individuals who may have reason to value the presence of the individual. The motives of these other individuals are given by their need for their presence to be valued by the first as worthy of preservation, creating a reciprocal relationship:

[T]he original resource a human being can offer to another is the capacity to recognize the worth of the other to exist – a resource that cannot be produced if it is not shared. … Recognizing the other human being as an end in itself, and recognizing the same human being as a means to the end of preserving oneself are as being united. … The good of self-preservation is achieved when mutual recognition between human beings is achieved. (Pizzorno 1991, 218–9)

Reciprocal recognition is the basis for forming the self in the first processes of socialisation: ‘[T]he presence of other people is necessary for acting. Before becoming a possible means for individual ends, the interaction with others appears as an end in itself’ (Pizzorno 1991, 221). Before setting goals to be achieved through social interaction, the individual must gain recognition to feed their self-esteem and confidence in their social capability, and so overcome the painful isolation of the state of nature, characterised by the lack of any attribution of identity. The intuition that ‘the purpose of human toil and industry is the many-layered task of ensuring, by successfully exhibiting one quality or another, that others recognise our existence’ is central to Pizzorno’s analysis of the way a person’s identity is formed through the recognition of others (Pizzorno 2007a, 36). He redefines ‘socialisation’ as an escape from the state of nature, as a transition from isolation to social existence, with individuals who come together not only on the basis of cooperation, but also on the basis of an affinity deriving from shared values (religious,
political, moral, etc.) that defines and stabilises their identity. Processes of reciprocal recognition are the scaffolding that underpins social order:

[F]or a social order to be possible, the individuals who will be part of this order must first recognize each other as worth preservation. ... They do this through forming identities and conceiving of their recognized selves as being identical in time. ... Individuals threatened by nature to impermanence get together to simulate reciprocal recognition and thus lend each other (relatively) stable identities. (Pizzorno 1991, 219–20)

The process of reciprocal recognition allows for the attribution of stable identities; thanks to these, the reciprocal interpretation of actions becomes possible, which in turn renders everyday social interaction intelligible and hence possible.9 Pizzorno (1991, 221) defines ‘identity’ as the accumulation of judgements of recognition received over time: ‘[In] a state in which the subject is acting on the assumption that when the events will follow his action occurs, the individual will judge them, in anticipation. But because the subject cannot judge, as we have seen, without some reference criteria that others share, his identity will depend on others recognizing it.’ Shifting the focus of theoretical analysis from interest to identity enables Pizzorno to grasp the essential intertemporal and interpersonal elements of the rationality of action: two dimensions that are neglected by rational choice theory, limited as it is to explanations based on subjective motivations.10

Without referring to the idea of ‘identity’, the theory of rational choice cannot clearly explain what underwrites the formation and stability of individual preferences.11 Preferences that seem to guide individual choices only acquire meaning if they result from some form of intersubjective recognition: attribution of identity by others. According to Pizzorno, the social circles in which the individual moves must be reconstructed in order to analyse the origins of stable preferences:

[J]ust as a solitary individual cannot dream up a language (words, phrases, grammar) which he or she would use to speak to him- or herself, we cannot harbour preferences which are not in some way open to ratification by a public body of knowledge – that is, which do not correspond to values which are recognised by some circle of recognition. ... If then the individual making choices wants the values (criteria of evaluation) which led to those choices to remain fixed in the future, they must seek a permanent circle of recognition, under whose real or imaginary gaze they have worked out or imagined the consequences of their choice; this will thus guarantee in t1 the same recognition that was assumed to be present in t. (Pizzorno 2000, 223)

Conditions of choice are affected by uncertainty regarding values, relative not to the state of the world, but to others’ interpretation of those values and to future states of the individual, ‘uncertainty regarding the way in which the future self will evaluate the situation in which it will find itself as a result of choices made now’ (Pizzorno 1986, 17). The interpersonal and intertemporal dimensions meet under the umbrella of value uncertainty. In order to eliminate the anxiety caused by value uncertainty, the agent forms his or her own preferences within a value system they can control over time only to the extent that he or she can maintain the stability of their relations with a collective entity. An individual capable of making a rational choice therefore,

constitutes a series of ‘I’s which make their own choices and which can have something in common only if they are set within a common circle of recognition. Personal identity consists of a vertical, intertemporal connection between the successive ‘I’s of a human being, something which is possible only thanks to interpersonal horizontal connections between different individual selves. (Pizzorno 1986, 18)
In order to anticipate the value of any choice he or she makes, the individual needs to be sure of continuing to belong to a circle of recognition that shares his or her values (relative to the class of act to which the decision belongs), and that will ascribe validity to the aims of the action. A stable circle of recognition is essential to the formation and consistency of the criteria for individual choice, as well as being a guarantee of individual identity constituted through the imputed authorship of a series of actions. Indeed, a person changes, an ‘I’ changes, when the collective which produced the values that allowed that person to act, to choose, to judge people or ideas in a predetermined way, to feel certain emotions – be it a group, a couple, an organisation or a movement – when that collective no longer exists for him or her. So it seems that it is difficult to maintain values, to feel gratified by rewards gained, to be satisfied by something, without referring to other individuals who are able to recognise those values, rewards and satisfactions and to respond in some way. (Pizzorno 1986, 9; emphasis in original)

The intertemporal and interpersonal dimensions analysed by Pizzorno enhance the notion of rationality of a decision, which thus comes to include a reference to the impact of a choice on the actor’s image of a continuous self, determined by the judgements of others regarding the actor’s identity. According to Pizzorno, the reconstruction of the actor’s points of reference in the social world is crucial to understanding behaviour and the criteria of choice implicit in that behaviour. The actor’s reference back to reciprocal rules of recognition structuring the social situation in which the action is situated constitutes the basis of the rational calculation made by the individual actor. The theory of rational choice confuses the biological concept of the ‘individual’ with the methodological concept of the ‘subject of social action’ (Pizzorno 2007b, 131). Far from being made up of individuals, a collective body is constituted of a specific combination of relations between social positions occupied by individuals in different, partial moments of their activity. An individual carries out social actions when he or she takes on identities defined by the structure of relations making up the collective body to which he or she belongs. In order to appear as the subject of choices – as the bearer of criteria of choice – the individual must meet the requirement to know, more or less precisely, how each one of us is like and unlike other people in the ways in which we act and feel, and to understand the causes of these similarities and differences. We need to know these things in order to establish what kind of recognition of ourselves we can expect from others, and so to anticipate the different possible meanings which may be assigned to our actions. Each person’s identity then becomes established, ensuring continuity over time and the possibility of communication with, and recognition by, others – and, thanks to this, reducing uncertainty regarding the values which necessarily govern our choices. (Pizzorno 1989a, 181)

Individuals act in social situations in which they must present themselves with a reputation, which allows them to establish situations of reciprocity. Circles of recognition form on the basis of shared agreement on what should be considered praiseworthy in a person engaged in a given activity (Pizzorno 2007d). Seen as sources of expectations and obligations for individuals ‘jealous of their reputation’, circles of recognition both ground and reinforce the normative order. Pizzorno’s ‘reputational’ model also leads to an original definition of the concept of ‘social capital’ as endowment with a network of social relations based on reputation,
understood as the capacity to reproduce social life. Individuals invest in social relations in order to gain the reputation they desire from their circles of recognition, to confirm their own value. The need for enduring social relationships in order for social capital to be employed brings together the theory of social capital and the theory of the reproduction of social life. *Pace* Coleman (1990), this addresses not only the processes by which social structures are exploited for individual ends, but also interpersonal processes of recognition producing social relations that are *potentially* available to be mobilised for the pursuit of specific aims.18

**Theory as explanation**

In order to act in society, each individual is called upon to manage the complexity of the web of social life by reference to a ‘vocabulary of identity’ that ‘provides us with the terms we need to define ourselves and others, our similarities and differences to others, the continuities and breaks with what we, and others, can know of our past’ (Pizzorno 1989b, 314). A repertoire of definitions of identity allows a social actor to understand others’ actions ‘by identifying the subject and hence predicting the course of action, because social activity in practice tells us more or less clearly that identity I1 corresponds to an action which follows rule-set R1’ (Pizzorno 1989a, 177). In order to interact with another subject’s actions, the social actor must render these actions intelligible by successfully identifying the other.

Sometimes the operation of understanding as identification is deceptive: the individual taking part in an interaction attributes an identity to the other actor, but one that does not adequately make sense of the action by fitting it into a series of predictable consequences. The mental process of identification meets a ‘stumbling-block’, introducing uncertainty into the calculations of an actor who cannot predict the other’s actions. The position in which the stumbling-blocks encountered by understanding as identification places the actor is in some ways analogous to the position of the social researcher as observer who does not take part in the interaction. While emphasising the pragmatic difference between comprehension and explanation, as well as the different cognitive capacities by which they are guided, Pizzorno grasps the continuity between the two. This is secured by a ‘hermeneutical chain’, which reflects an analogous continuity between everyday life and processes of change: ‘[I]t’s within the microprocess of everyday change, at the point where some event makes it more difficult to deal with the facts in ways we are used to and take for granted, that we find the roots of activity of explanation – or, more precisely, of the *demand for explanation*’ (Pizzorno 1996a, 130; emphasis in original).

Indeed, social theory has the role of smoothing out the stumbling blocks that confront the actor’s understanding. It has an unveiling function (Pizzorno 1993a), answering to a logic of clarification; it explains significant dimensions of social behaviour in a mediated form, not intuitively available to the actors’ own understanding.19 Theory aims to recreate the cognitive continuity of the contexts of action needed for social coordination, updating the identity maps used by individual actors with its categories. The goal is to re-establish the intelligibility of the social universe, threatened by the processes of change created by the making and unmaking of circles of recognition as social situations, by the multiplicity of processes of formation and transformation of social identities.20 Both understanding and explanation are responses to demands for interpretation, for release.
from a condition of cognitive uncertainty. Understanding as ‘first degree interpretation’ is
the interpretation of others’ actions by the participant in an interaction, with a view to
guiding the participant’s own action. It is a cognitive component of the actor’s decision-
making process, based on the non-analytical intuitions of ordinary knowledge. By
contrast, the social scientist’s explanation, ‘second degree interpretation’, is interpretation
carried out by an observer for the benefit of a historically specific audience, engaged in
building the categories of an organised body of knowledge; this type of interpretation sets
out to recognise the rationality concealed in others’ actions in order to make predictable
what had appeared unforeseen.

For Pizzorno, social theory represents a continual and permanently inadequate effort
to update the ‘vocabulary of identity’, the ‘store of masks’ that allows us to establish
analogies and differences within human experience. By carrying out an operation of
reidentification, setting an action in the context of an identity different from the one
previously attributed to the actor by a participant, theory can interpret an action so as to
render it rational. According to Pizzorno (1989b, 319), ‘an identity which can be
recognised by the subject of an action is rational when it develops in the way that the
identity of that subject made it possible to foresee’ (see also Pizzorno (1993i) on the same
point). It is the role of theory to turn irrationality into incomprehension, an inability to
distinguish: a provisional state that can always be overcome by explanation. Explanation,
imposing a new identity, brings order to the flux of recognition of identities, rendering
transparent social situations that had earlier seemed unclear.

Critique of economic theories of democracy

Pizzorno’s conception of democracy (Pizzorno 1993e) develops from a detailed criticism
of the theories, beginning with the work of Downs (1957), which have been applied to the
study of politics concepts and hypotheses stemming from economics. Economic theories
conceptualise democracy as an electoral market in which an exchange between the
represented and representatives takes place: candidates offer policies to the electorate
in exchange for the votes they need to secure control over government bodies. Theories
of democracy as a marketplace aspire to be both analytical, constructing models capable of
predicting individuals’ choice of action, and normative, prescribing mechanisms
of representation as procedures allowing the greatest number of individuals to pursue
their own interests:

[If the theory works, liberty and efficiency, egotism and collective usefulness, can blend in
harmony, as they already do in the theory of the free market. And the theory will both appear
realistic (because it recognises individual egotism) and appear to legitimise democracy
(because it recognises that the common good is attainable by means of predetermined
procedures of choice). (Pizzorno 1993e, 146)

Democracy seen as a regime centred on freedom of choice – as a competition to gain office,
between parties oriented towards gaining the support of voters motivated by specific
policies – ensures the fullest satisfaction of those interests that prompt political activity.

According to Pizzorno, these models have only limited capacity to explain some of the
behaviours most relevant to a democratic regime: for instance, why people vote, become
activists or undertake a political career. Economic theories run up against the “paradox of
the voter”: someone assumed to be a rational actor should not carry out such an irrational
act as voting, given the minute possibility that their vote will be decisive in the election of a candidate and that the election of that candidate subsequently will be decisive in approving the desired policy. Other activities typical of democratic life (staying informed, debating, activism) do nothing but add cost, while their utility remains close to zero. For Pizzorno, analysis of political action in terms of costs and benefits, which attributes the production of political value only to the enactment of policy and reduces political participation to a cost, is unsustainable: ‘[W]e must find other sources of values in a political system if we want to be realistic’ (Pizzorno 1993e, 151).

Pizzorno finds Downs’ solution to the paradox of the voter unsatisfactory. Downs puts forward the argument of electoral social responsibility, in which the voters take on the cost of the vote (reducing their short-term utility) in order to sustain the democratic system, which produces individual benefits in the longer term. This argument is clearly inadequate: the probability that a single vote can contribute to the survival of democracy is just as insignificant as the probability that it will bring about the victory of a candidate offering favoured policies: ‘[A]nyone who wants to consider a procedural system as a public good cannot dodge the problem of the free rider’ (Pizzorno 1993e, 151; emphasis in original). Riker and Ordeshook (1968) also present an unsatisfactory argument, suggesting that those who vote do so to affirm their solidarity with a chosen party. This argument would lead to a revision of the entire theory, given that it would involve the introduction of solidarity as a source of value, a motivation for chosen policies.

Economic models fail to explain the reasons why voters trust candidates’ promises to make policy:

[H]ow voters calculate the utility obtainable from a candidate’s future activity is one thing; why they place their trust in a candidate is another. Someone might make very enticing promises, but I might have no faith in them. Besides, any party is capable of making enticing promises; it is more likely that people follow one party rather than another, not because of big promises to provide them with utility, but because the party they follow inspires greater faith in them. It follows that a theory of democratic choice, rather than studying the utility which may flow from party programmes to the citizens who choose those parties, should begin to study the reasons for the faith which citizens express in this or that party. This is a social relationship which logically must precede the relationship of service, or the sale of useful provisions in exchange for votes. (Pizzorno 1993e, 155)

In order to explain electoral voting Fiorina (1977, 1978) identifies three factors in addition to ‘issue voting’ – the rational choice vote par excellence, based on the anticipated utility of promised policies. The first is the ‘simple retrospective vote’ based on an evaluation of policies carried out by the government; the second is the ‘complex retrospective vote’, an intertemporal choice resulting from the voter’s evaluation of past experiences with a particular party; and the third is ‘initial bias’, a function of socialisation, which explains hereditary party allegiances. However, Fiorina’s argument remains within the framework of an economic analysis of the ballot box, which reduces people’s reasons for trust in a party to an evaluation of the measures the party puts into effect. For Pizzorno, any economic analysis of the vote faces a paradox:

[I]f the voter votes in exchange for specific measures or favours, they will indeed vote with full knowledge of why they are voting, but selfishly, and the sum of votes cast in this way will produce a fragmentary and collectively suicidal economic programme. However, if voters vote according to their own judgment of the general state of the national economy, they will vote
on the basis of ignorance and push the government to take short-term measures which would be damaging to the economy in the longer term. (Pizzorno 1993e, 157–8)

This paradox undermines the normative claims of economistic approaches to democracy: if politicians did prioritise immediate sectoral interests in accordance with the selfish requests of their electorate, it would be impossible to impose a coherent national economic policy. Conversely, if the average voter aspired to pass judgment on the economic situation when voting, they could be deceived by governments introducing ‘cosmetic’ economic policies before the elections, aimed at short-term improvement of economic indicators at the expense of longer term growth.

This second aspect of the economic analysis of voting leads Pizzorno to take into account political, symbolic theories, based on the assumption that the function of the government is representation, the distribution of symbolic benefits that encourage citizens to identify with particular communities without affecting their material interests. For Pizzorno these theories are not an alternative to the economic approach, but rather a complement, bringing the production of symbolic as well as tangible goods into the political marketplace: ‘[U]sing the concept of symbolic benefit tends to lead to the same error as using the concept of utility. It only goes as far as the moment where the individual seems to enjoy the benefit, without asking what conditions are structurally necessary for that benefit to take place’ (Pizzorno 1993e, 163).

Pizzorno puts forward a theory based on the statement that ‘the value of a good cannot rest solely on its perceived utility to the individual, but must be intersubjectively recognisable. The individual must be able to refer to others, to check that the value given by the benefit is not illusory’ (Pizzorno 1993e, 165). Given that needs are socially learnt and their fulfilment is socially determined, the value of a good rests on the intersubjective recognition of its importance. Pizzorno (1993e, 167) proposes that the constitution of a collective identity should be seen as the presupposition of individual choices: ‘[T]he function of allocation of benefits must not be excluded but it can only be based on the existence of an identity-granting collectivity, within which it can be put into effect.’ The capacity to define collective identities is an intrinsic part of politics: ‘[P]olitical activity is concerned with the modification of needs much more than with simply satisfying existing needs’ (Pizzorno 1993e, 165).

An analysis of political interests focused on the processes of collective identification that define those interests makes it possible to overcome the paradox of the voter:

Those who carry out this act [voting] – futile as an individual action – consider it as an act of collective identification. What saves this action from being pointless is not that is an efficient means to that end – it is not – but that it is carried out simultaneously and ritually by other members of a certain group, to which individuals through this action demonstrate they belong. Thus the quantitative effect also makes sense. No one believes that a single vote can swing the election of a candidate; but if it can provide one extra bit of information on the existence and strength of a party or a collective position, why not cast it? Even the partial sensitivity of this behaviour to certain costs (bad weather, distance from polling stations, the complexity of the information needed to make a choice (as for example in American elections)) should be reconsidered. In effect, what is calculated in terms of costs and benefits is not the likelihood of gaining political measures in the future, but the value of the act of witness represented by voting. That is, levels of electoral participation vary according to the importance of this gesture – in other words, according to the strength of political commitment – not according to variation in the likelihood of gaining benefits. Consider the cases of people who vote at great cost (for example, physical danger at times when democracy is under threat), or despite willingly acknowledging that
there is no likelihood of their chosen candidates gaining power. These are facts that can be explained by a theory of identification, not utility. (Pizzorno 1993e, 167–8)

The theory of identification can be applied effectively to other phenomena of political participation that are not means of obtaining particular measures, but elements of the process of elaborating collective identities, an essentially political phenomenon. According to Pizzorno (1993c, 103) political participation is ‘an act in solidarity with others…with a view to preserving or modifying the structures (and hence the values) of the dominating system’. Political participation is the expression of belonging to a group, and according to Pizzorno to participate necessitates being among equals, belonging to a collective entity which functions as an area of equality, whose members are equal in the face of the collective long-term aims they set themselves.

Inasmuch as it grounds collective identities, continually redefining interests before satisfying them, political action is characterised by the presence of two activities. The first, identifying activity, takes place when, politicians carry out the role of creating, preserving and strengthening the collective identities which appear on the political scene in their many forms (groups, parties, movements, associations, states etc.). Such activity involves creating symbols which members of a given group use to recognise one another, communicate solidarity and agree collective action among themselves. This is, more or less explicitly, how ideologies and different interpretations of ideologies are produced, from which derive the definitions of long-term orientations which are given to collective action. This is how the symbols distinguishing one collective identity from another get established. (Pizzorno 1993e, 175)

By recourse to ‘political discourse’ – the language that sets goals to be pursued in the long term and can establish enduring connections and intense loyalties – an identity-granting collectivity can establish itself: a stable collective point of reference that assures the continued recognition of interests pursued by individuals and reduces the uncertainty deriving from choices that cannot be resolved in the short term. The second type of activity is efficient activity: this takes place when ‘politicians make decisions directly aiming to improve, or prevent the deterioration of, the relative position of the collective body they represent within the system in which it functions’ (Pizzorno 1993e, 175). Efficient activity means that a politician does not rework or reformulate goals that are already defined and shared with the identity-granting collectivity to which they belong. Rather, the politician obtains benefits for their own group through control over governing bodies or negotiation with other actors within the political system.

The focus on communication as the cement of identity-granting collectivities brings Pizzorno to criticise Habermas. Attributing normative weight to communicative action, in contrast to instrumental goal-oriented action, Habermas (1996) develops a deliberative model of democracy that is presented, like Pizzorno’s, as an alternative to economic models. Habermas’s model centres on the concept of the public sphere as an arena in which activity is regulated by communicative rationality aimed at mutual linguistic understanding between the actors of civil society. According to Pizzorno, Habermas arbitrarily reduces communication aimed at reciprocal recognition between collective identities to the simple pursuit of rational understanding. For Pizzorno, this type of communication – seen as the continuous task of defining and redefining an identity-attributing system – may be both cooperative and conflictual.

The democratic public sphere is an arena for the constitution/presentation of identities that enter an inherently unstable system of recognitions, which ‘demands that interests
should be identified on a “categorical” basis, but then does not provide stable criteria for such identification and so promotes their analytical multiplication’ (Pizzorno 1993h, 282). The public sphere presents itself as the sphere of freedom of identity-based speech; in it, there takes place,

a continual process of formation, recognition, transformation of personal and collective identities, which develop through a series of operations ranging from dialogic interaction among a few people, through the judicial recognition of the rights of new collective subjects, to the cultural or statistical classification of social categories as distinct in some way from other categories. In other words, the public scene is the forum for a society to reflect on itself, both critically and constructively (criticising received categories and designing new categories). This is a space not governed by the telos of mutual understanding but by the meeting – sometimes negotiated, sometimes conflictual – of schemata which organise, initially in diverse ways, criteria for classification and recognition of differences and hence for the attribution of identity. (Pizzorno 2001, 21; emphasis in original)

A precariously balanced recognition system, whose institutionalisation is always threatened by the appearance of new identities that achieve recognition through expressive and participatory activity, can only keep itself intact by way of the principle of reciprocal recognition. Freedom to communicate, which goes along with the democratic legal institutionalisation of the principle of free speech, does not gain its value from the possibility of arriving at a presumptively rational body of legislation by way of a free flow of ideas, information and argument, as Habermas maintains, but from the freedom to convert, the freedom of collective identification it ensures.28 The democratic unbinding of freedom to communicate brings with it the possibility of creating and publicly presenting new identities; through their collective action, these give new meaning to the legal principle of equal treatment. Democracy assigns the task of communicative mediation between equality and diversity to the continued struggle over the interpretation of the system of rights between different identities – identities which, gaining recognition in the public sphere, continually redefine needs and situations of interest. There is no pursuit of understanding in the anarchic public sphere: rather, the communicative freedom to present oneself in public as an ‘other’ is unleashed – and, with it, the freedom to struggle for legal recognition of the other, as other.

Transformations of representation

Pizzorno’s theoretical approach, focusing on identity and recognition, allows us to grasp the necessary conditions for the emergence of new collective identities in response to situations where mutual recognition is interrupted. Pizzorno (1993d, 1993h, 1996a, 1996b) focuses on social upheavals: occupational and geographical mobility, changes in generational relationships, wars, invasions, etc. Generalising through hypotheses, he maintains that projects of social transformation, and the groups and movements promoting them, tend to appear when such an upheaval disrupts the usual forms of social interaction, renders inadequate the traditional schemata by which the meaning of an action is interpreted in society, and causes individuals to feel the loss of traditional cognitive and normative certainties and the need for new orientations. He notes that,

when personal identity rooted in the past gives the ‘I’ who makes choices ever less certainty of being recognised by the people among whom the individual must act, then new identities are searched out, based on shared future destinies. …People cannot act without an identity.
When nobody calls into question the identity they have received, identity is taken for granted, but when it is threatened or wears thin, without even realising, they fight for an identity. (Pizzorno 1986, 22–3)

Lack of solidarity and deficit of identity drives individuals to take collective action to recreate normative certainties and recognition that can be relied upon. Movements, groups and parties are areas of participation that offer new forms of recognition, overcoming the value uncertainty created by structural changes that erode the social networks of past forms of recognition. The motivation to take part stems from the gratification of belonging to a group – that is, relationships of trust and solidarity, mutual support, assumption of common goals on the basis of which to cooperate and the sense of identity that derives from them.

This approach makes it possible to explain the success of mass parties of social integration. By taking on to itself a large part of the social existence of its members, the mass party offered new sources of collective identification to the masses excluded from the political system. During the period marked by rapid socio-economic modernisation and expansion of suffrage, these groups witnessed the erosion of traditional circles of recognition of their social identity. The mass party initiated processes of rebuilding a social identity, which members recognised in one another when they took part in party activities, and they could see was recognised by the rest of society, on whose attention the party imposed itself as a collective subject.

The mass party answered the demand for identity by those excluded from the pluralist representational system, dedicating the party to carrying out ‘identifying activity’. Mass party identifying activity, capable of creating stable links and intense loyalties, playing down the pursuit of immediate, specific interests in favour of universal, long-term aims, guaranteed the procedural treatment of these interests and thus reduced their pressure on the representational political system. The appearance of parties of integration enabled the pluralist system of representation to overcome the crisis created by the phenomenon of collective mobilisation, brought about by the appearance of new urban and industrial masses and the extension of suffrage. Integrated participation, organised by mass parties, had functional consequences on pluralism, both by identifying and transmitting the needs of the new population groups in coordinated and practically manageable ways, and by drawing together and unifying the delegates of the new masses, applying discipline to their integration into the system and bringing to a close the process of nation-building socialisation.

Within democracies, political conflict conducted at a high level of ideological intensity has predisposed social parties to mediation, precisely because of its function of strengthening political identification. Mutually antagonistic collectivities have made democratic procedures the means to strengthen their own identities and, at the same time, negotiate co-existence. As Pizzorno observes, with the advent of mass politics hinging on parties of social integration,

what came to the assistance of the cohesion of the liberal state was what Hobbes would have considered its mortal illness – the right for partial and partisan identities to be represented within the institutions of the state. The process of representation revealed itself to be a mechanism of the production of partisan identities. In the very electoral act of choice, and – obviously – even more in becoming a member of some political party, association, movement, or other partisan group, the individual citizen accepts an identity that he will bear in common with other citizens and in the name of which he will operate and fight and generally act in
a way that is easily recognizable, understandable, and predictable by the other members of the state. (Pizzorno 1991, 225)

Identity-granting exchanges between the represented and their representatives, in which the former offer loyalty, obedience and trust in exchange for collective incentives, have ensured respect for the rules of the democratic game. Representatives, who hold identifying resources for collective subjects, have an interest ‘insofar as they are tied to long term identities bound up in a system of recognition, in not pursuing the immediate satisfaction of their constituents’ interests in their entirety if this clashes too strongly with other interests represented within the system’ (Pizzorno 1993h, 257).

In order to obtain future benefits for members of their own collective group, the representative must take account of the bonds created by the presence of other components of the political system and moderate their own immediate requests with a view to subsequent negotiations. For Pizzorno, as far as ideology sanctions and facilitates acceptance of representatives’ postponement of goals, it reinforces this mechanism. Paradoxically, then, a coherent ideology, which commands the consent of a class of bearers of interests, even if it appears to present non-negotiable objectives, favours the partial representation of interests (insofar as it translates into organised action), and therefore facilitates the functioning of the system. (Pizzorno 1993h, 258)

The capacity of ideology to inspire devotion and induce followers to sacrifice short-term interests for longer term benefits, whose interpretation is delegated to representatives, leads Pizzorno to ‘evaluate collective identifications with a strong ideological content as more functional to the state than weak political identities, which are corporative and penetrated by pressure groups, and hence ineffective in the task of moderating interests’ (Pizzorno 1993e, 179).

In the restricted-suffrage parliamentary system of the liberal regime, the vote translated traditions of particularistic social deference towards the local notable into a political mandate of a personal nature. By contrast, in representative systems based on the mass party, the voter’s faith in their representative is based on shared membership of a collective subject capable of defining personal identity through the normative proposal of an alternative social reality, to be won in the long term by means of political action (Pizzorno 1996b). Given their ability to reinforce a sense of belonging and inspire faith, far from hampering representatives by binding them to a programmatic mandate, ideological platforms assure them that partial autonomy that is needed to reach compromises with other collective identities present in the system. Organisational and cultural structures of political identification created by mass parties have allowed reciprocal recognition by the partisans of potentially devastating social extremes; participation in democratic procedures has turned enemies into predictable and trustworthy players of a common game. Paradoxically, the irreconcilable differences between ideological standpoints that strengthened partisan collective identities has also helped to make demands negotiable. Thanks to identity-granting activities, mass parties reduced the threat of ungovernability that an expanded suffrage could have brought with it. Democracy based on parties of integration has shown itself to be an efficient mechanism of social control in Western societies where essential social resources (capital and labour, sources of religious identification) have escaped administrative-military control (Pizzorno 1993h).

Pizzorno’s approach links the birth of the mass party as a representative agency to the lack of recognition experienced by large groups in the nineteenth century, as a result of the
rapid succession of upheavals associated with the building of the nation-state and the Industrial Revolution. The same argument also explains the transitory nature of the mass party:

[Parties of social integration can be found in periods of intense social transformation when new categories of interest push for representation in the political system. . . They form to coordinate access to the political system by the new masses, with a view to controlling it. Once both access and control are assured they seem, so to speak, obsolescent. (Pizzorno 1993h, 269)]

The mass party is a transitory phenomenon, victim of its own success at reducing those imbalances of status resented by the masses and fuel participation in conventional political activity.32

The erosion of the partial solidarities (associated with geographical regions, socio-professional groups, religious or linguistic communities) in which both the organisational force of the parties and the process of depoliticisation was rooted, had both exogenous and endogenous causes: on the one hand, the ability of private capital to go beyond national boundaries, thanks to changes in the structure of the productive system; on the other, the need for bureaucratic efficiency and the increasingly technical nature of the problems to be addressed by the welfare state. These processes drive the representative system to take on a new form. Instead of ideological politics, born of the era of political hope that organised social forces could transform the social order, we have ethical politics, whose emblems appear when the reforming capability of the state to affect structures of inequality and social exclusion disappears (Pizzorno 2007f).

The integration of the masses into a national collectivity and the reorganisation of interest groups, stimulated by the growth of individualism associated with a neoliberal revival of capitalism, undermine the identity-granting capacity of political parties; increasingly, these become state agencies carrying out the selection of political personnel needed to manage institutions in the name of the people.33 Parties survive as a form of guarantee in exchanges between government and micro-interests that take place over an extended period and involve a large number of actors, and consequently necessitate a class of trustworthy mediators. For Pizzorno, the party, with its durable structure and its public image, can be considered ‘a kind of bank of political credit, which functions through the continual checking of the amount of credit available which is carried out in the electoral process’ (Pizzorno 1993h, 275). Parties survive as repositories of faith in political mediation and as liturgical experts that prepare the electoral ritual, ratifying the democratic regime as one governed by political personnel chosen by the people from among distinct teams of candidates. Parties whose lack of programmatic distinctiveness deprives them of any clear identity – necessary in order to stand out among different electoral propositions – must resort to personalising the vote; this is also encouraged by ‘producers of visibility’ such as the media.34

Parties, as organisations with a media profile, change the nature of management selection: increased value is placed upon meeting the image-related standards imposed by the media regarding culture, dedication to work and organisational ability, while party strategy is now directed towards gains in visibility rather than substantive gains.35 The pre-eminence of visibility in organisational choices can only weaken ground-level participation even further, accentuating the cynicism and passivity of groups already depoliticised by the fall of ideologically motivated politics. All attention in politics in the era of visibility is
focused on physical images and on leaders’ life stories, creating what Pizzorno describes as the ‘fantasy-world of politics’.

The knowledge needed for the public to grant or withhold trust in elected representatives is reduced to the minimum, and this knowledge is not made up of information or opinion on the competence or trustworthiness of an individual politician (an impossible judgement at such a distance and with so little accurate information) but of day-to-day details about a person’s moral character, or other qualities which can easily be judged on the basis of the normal experience of the general public. (Pizzorno 1996b, 1029–30)

The difficulty of carrying out a technical evaluation of government activity (due to global economic interdependency), the lack of major differences between political programmes (due to the extinction of opposition in principle, with goals that were not negotiable within the system), and media-driven centralisation of political socialisation and mobilisation of opinion: these factors converge in offering criteria for choosing between alternative political programmes based on images of a leader, who appears more and more like an actor, chosen to represent the human type thought to epitomise the ideal society to the voter. From programme-based politics we move to moralising politics (Pizzorno 1998, 52–6), in which the focus of techniques for presenting electoral propositions shifts from the content of large-scale programmes for the material well-being of the population to the virtue of the leader as representative of a concept of social relationships to which voters aspire. The content of political activity, in the contemporary ethical framework, focuses on rules and the criteria for everyday social life rather than the grand ideological alternatives of the past. In the era of mediated politics, which is ever more ‘constrained’ and less ‘discretionary’, participation in collective action is no longer channelled through the structures of national, representative democracy, being realisable most of all in struggles to achieve extra-statal, or local/populist, or universal/planetary objectives (Pizzorno 2007f).

Conclusion

Combining refined metatheoretical reflection with a lively curiosity about the processes of attribution of identity that channel social activity, Pizzorno has shown himself to be an excellent cartographer of the constantly shifting terrain of society. Underpinned by a wealth of understanding of social scientific literature and an unusual analytical capacity, Pizzorno’s valuable research work offers us sophisticated methodological and theoretical tools, with which he has drawn maps of the most important processes in modernity. As processes of globalisation continue and accelerate, eroding traditional collective reference points (nations, religions, classes), scholars now have the challenge of using Pizzorno’s tools and updating the maps he has given us.

Translated by Jane Gamble

Notes

1. Pizzorno observes that not only personal experience, but the whole school of social science is marked by confrontation with diversity: ‘Is it not perhaps true that the fundamental question for social sciences is exactly that of explaining the nature of problems which emerge when different cultures come into contact?’ (Pizzorno 2007e, 276).
2. By ‘micro-departures from the state of nature’, Pizzorno means the emergence from isolation or solitude of two or more individuals who reciprocally recognise each other, allocating each other a specific identity.

3. While the 1977 paper (Pizzorno 1993g) is the first stage in Pizzorno’s reflection on identity and collective action, the author had been interested in identity forming processes since the 1960s. This is demonstrated by the recent republication of the 1960 ‘Essay on the Mask’ (Pizzorno 2007g), in which the mask (as Sassatelli (2007) notes in a conversation with the author) is seen as a framework for the constitution of an identity. According to Pizzorno, the mask does more than hide, because by ‘hiding somebody’ it reveals, it becomes ‘a tool of social communication’, ‘presence to the onlooker’. Pizzorno finds the essence of the mask in its relationship to the gaze of others, in its providing a reference that allows for identification and recognition by others.

4. According to Pizzorno, free riding is suspended in cases of conflict of recognition, where a group struggles to obtain the recognition of its distinct identity: ‘[If] what is at stake is the acquisition or confirmation of an identity through which someone wants to be recognised, that person cannot stay outside the game. Non-participants – free riders – cannot win the benefits at stake, because identity is created through participation in conflict’ (Pizzorno 1993f, 196). By contrast, the principle of free riding is valid in cases of distributive conflict between fully formed identities, where benefits can be obtained even by those who are not involved in conflict.

5. See La Valle (2005, esp. 448–54) on Pizzorno’s role in bringing to the attention of contemporary sociology ideas of identity and recognition.


7. As Coleman (1990) intuited, it is the right to act that constitutes social action and this arises from the intersubjective consensus action meets in a given situation. Yet, as Pizzorno (2006, 312) notes, the attribution of consensus to an action can only be preceded by attribution of meaning to it by participants in the situation where the action takes place ‘as consensus can only be reached...by those who have understood the meaning of the act consented to’.

8. Pizzorno (1996a, 109) defines ‘methodological individualism’ as a theory of decisions: ‘[I]t is assumed that social reality is made up of an accumulation of individual actions, that every single action by an individual is caused by decisions made by the subject of the action, and thus it is concluded that decisions constitute the unit of analysis for explaining social reality itself.’

9. Pizzorno (1996a, 119) writes: ‘[T]he reciprocal recognition of some kind of identity between the participants in a social interaction is the condition by which the interaction itself is possible. ...In order for them to be able to understand one another’s actions, the actors need to see themselves as having some form of stable identity. When this process of recognition is repeated routinely, and the participants deal with new situations by linking them to comparable earlier situations whose outcomes they remember, adequate consistency of meaning will be ensured, expectations will be met, and predictions can be made with certainty.’ Such considerations lead Pizzorno to argue that the single most important operation in the constitution of social order is categorical naming: the process of attribution and adoption of social identities that produces interpretative schemata through which individuals understand social reality.

10. While these elements are addressed by the neoinstitutionalist perspective, this position remains methodologically sterile in as much as it grounds the rationality of action in the actor’s intentions without reference to others. For further details on the relationship between the theory of rational choice and neoinstitutionalism, see Pizzorno (2007b, 135–41).

11. The origin of preferences cannot be explained as the effect of individual choice. Nozick’s theoretical proposal to consider the ‘formation of an image of the self’ as a process generating preferences clearly shows that such a process cannot be the result of deliberate choice in that a self-image must be recognised by others and so requires interaction rather than decision (Nozick 1993). While a conception of oneself seems logically necessary to explain preferences, ‘in order to understand how people construct particular self-images and derive preferences from these, we shall need to look further afield’ (Pizzorno 1996a, 113).

12. This concept of social identity focuses on the coherence, continuity and predictability of the acting subject’s preferences. The attributes of these preferences derive not only from individual biography (personal identity); on a social level they can be related to roles (systemic identity) and/or belonging to a particular collectivity (collective identity).
13. Pizzorno’s identitary approach has been subjected to harsh but ineffectual criticism by Aguiar and de Francisco (2002).

14. Pizzorno (2000, 214) notes that, in his model of recognition, ‘the individual cannot understand personal goals otherwise than as the outcome of his or her way of interacting with others; and these goals must be such that their attainment follows criteria that are recognisable by another individual. Goals formed in solitude are neither attainable nor conceivable. Not attainable because . . . social sanction in one form or another (approval, admiration, envy, comparison, emulation, participation of one type or another) is an essential element of the satisfactory attainment of goals. Not conceivable because goals must be formulated according to the grammar of the processes of attaining goals which is practiced or sanctioned by a circle of others.’ The formation of links of recognition is a condition of the possibility of goals being pursued.

15. From Pizzorno’s point of view, the actor’s inclusion in a circle of recognition, his image of himself as homo sociologicus taking part in an interactive process of identification that gives rise to the constitution of institutionalised social relations, is a condition for the formation of the individual’s identity as homo economicus equipped with long-term preferences that guide the individual’s choice of which course of action to undertake (Negri 1989). See also Pizzorno (1983) on identity as a precedent and condition for interest.

16. Pizzorno (2007d) distinguishes between three types of reputation: credibility (developed over time in situations of interpersonal relations); excellence (a judgement given by the equals of a person in a particular area of competence); and community conformity (a judgement given by representatives of a collectivity, confirming and ratifying the rules that regulate it).

17. The theory of the structure of the acting subject ‘jealous of their reputation’ cannot neglect the third component of the self: the judging self, introduced by Adam Smith (1759) and unfortunately not included specifically in the model of the self by Coleman (1990). On this point, see Pizzorno (2006).

18. On the contrast between Pizzorno and the theorists of social capital, see Pizzorno (2007c, 2007d).

19. Social theory not only overcomes the stumbling-block, but also reduces distance by explaining events in cultural contexts different from those of the observer.

20. Pizzorno is interested in explaining actions that are not immediately transparent, trying to reconstruct the rules of the specific social context that gives meaning to individual actions and puts them into a coherent series of precedents and consequences. In contrast to the tenets of methodological individualism, it is assumed that ‘an individual’s reality can be observed and defined in the same way in every society and in every situation. It is not divisible into units (for example, into roles) which are understood, reconstructed, classified, interpreted, together with their meanings, independently of their attribution to this or that individual. The observer imagined by methodological individualism is omniscient, the imagined subject of the action to be studied is perfectly transparent and the composition of the context in which the action takes place is entirely without influence on the definition of the type of actions dealt with’ (Pizzorno 1989c, 145).

21. Scientific inquiry – a ‘means of unveiling’ diversity that escapes being grasped by common sense classifications, suggesting new means of justifying the rationality of social reality – reveals, within the structure of the identities that serve to identify different social situations, the fragile underpinning of everyday social interaction (Pizzorno 2007a).

22. Pizzorno’s critique of neoutilitarian theories of democracy represents the best example of the strategy adopted by the author to challenge rational choice theory. Rather than condemn the lack of realism of the premises of the theory, Pizzorno held it necessary to ‘suspend judgement on premises and allow oneself to be guided by the rationale of the theory itself to the point where relevant facts seem to remain unexplained and logical contradictions seem unsurmountable’ (Pizzorno 1993e, 180). Pizzorno has developed a criticism from within of rational choice, aimed at highlighting its logical difficulties and empirical opacities. On Pizzorno’s reflections on democracy, see also Vassallo (1995).

23. Pizzorno (1993e, 170) writes: ‘[T]he logic of individual political action cannot be reconstructed as the logic of a choice of the most appropriate means to a given end, but rather as the logic of
an action of belonging. That is, as the logic of comparison and conflict between collective identities, with the major effect of modifying the participants’ objectives.’

24. The concept of an ‘area of equality’ allows Pizzorno to suggest a particular reading of elections as celebratory ceremonies allowing the formal, institutionalised periodical reconfirmation of the area of equality represented by the national community. In democracy, the democratic rite represents ‘a periodic reaffirmation that all citizens are equal in the face of a fundamental act of the state. Indeed, choice only represents one of the meanings of the act of voting, the other a confirmation of solidarity’ (Pizzorno 1993c, 107). Universal suffrage has a function of national integration being ‘the act of birth, repeated ritually at every election, of a collective of individuals who are its members in that they enjoy this specific right, and by exercising it establish a condition of equality between them’ (Pizzorno 1996b, 981). Voting is an expression of belonging rather than a choice between alternatives because ‘freedom of choice is born from participation in a single collective identity’ (Pizzorno 1996b, 982).

25. Absolute politics, typical of the modern West, defines the identities to which interests can refer. According to Pizzorno (1993b), political modernisation does not represent a process of secularisation of values, but territorialisation of binding connections. Western history shows a transfer of collective responsibility for ultimate goals from a collective bounded by Christianity to distinct collectivities defined by the territorial boundaries of individual states. See Pizzorno’s summary of recent Western politics (Pizzorno 1993b) for more on the absolute politics of the Hobbesian moment, and on the monopolisation of the production of authoritative collective identities by the territorial principle – successor to the tools of the politics of transcendence practised by the Church to conserve the supraterritorial religious identity of the Gregorian moment. The concept of ‘absolute politics’ guides Cella (2006) in his study of the introduction of differences through boundaries.

26. Della Porta, Greco, and Szakolczai (2000) define ‘identifying activity’ as ‘first degree exchange’: this creates the collective identities needed to evaluate the medium- and long-term advantages and disadvantages of ‘second degree exchange’, consisting of efficient activity, aimed at gaining material goods and other forms of utility. This distinction between first- and second-degree exchange reflects the priority Pizzorno gives to identification over efficiency.

27. Pizzorno (2001) criticises the Habermasian distinction between the public sphere and civil society, inverting Habermas’s order of logical succession between activity in civil society and activity in the public sphere. Without the prospect of recognition of identity in the public sphere, Pizzorno argues, it would not be rational for individuals to take part in the activity of the collective subjects of civil society.

28. The freedom of conversion, the unlimited free possibility of redefining interests through the formation of a collective identity without the possibility of defining a common good, characterises representative pluralistic regimes. This allows us to formulate a theory not of the contents, but of the forms taken by collective identities in their successive relationships with the system: ‘[T]he affirmation of identity first, then the organisation of its representation, then its bureaucratisation and the elaboration of the representatives’ interests as a group, finally its involvement in summit talks with those in power: these successive phases, when they take place in this way, suggest a cycle going from collective enthusiasms to trust in representatives and finally to the beginnings of distrust; this in turn creates the conditions for the cycle to recur’ (Pizzorno 1993h, 281).

29. Lack of recognition is also the analytical key to interpreting cases of ‘identity inflation’: ‘[T]he bearers of a collective identity sometimes feel it is threatened – because they fear the little-known risks of a new situation they are moving into; or because the unifying group (party, social movement, national State, or similar) has lost standing relative to others against which it measures itself; or because the leadership of the group finds it faces an internal threat. In this situation a process of identity production (ideological, ritual, doctrinal, gestural) develops within the collective, evoking past situations in which, for whatever reason, the collective felt itself strong and unified. With this ideological operation the leadership of the group aims to fend off the threat by reinforcing the visible and communicable aspects of what were originally the circumstances in which the group formed itself or made itself look strong’ (Pizzorno 2007e, 288–9). Group formation, as a case of identity inflation, can thus be seen a response to the threat, created by social change, of erosion of collectivities that were previously close-knit.
30. Pizzorno defines groups, movements and parties as closed networks, ‘structures of relationships whose members have a preponderance of relationships with each other, while they have no, or very few, relationships outside the network. Rules regulating action are unanimously shared, they are binding, and transgressions are punished. Action of an individual to conform with the rules is strongly encouraged by others, and encouragement and approval reinforce the will to undertake or pursue the action – which thus is incentivised and becomes beneficial in itself. When these conditions are identified, decisions by individuals to participate in collective action have no need to be calculated according to their outcome because they are motivated by the participation itself’ (Pizzorno 1996a, 127). By participating, the individual gains recognition from an internal source, produced by the development of interpersonal relations of cooperation in which all group members take part. By contrast, recognition from an external source would derive from the prioritisation of the collective subject – the group as a whole – over the recognition of others.

31. See Pizzorno (1980a, 1980b) for a deeper analysis of the two functions enacted by the parties: transmission of demands and strengthening of the mandate to representatives.

32. The precarious nature of the representative regime that hinges on mass parties is encapsulated by the idea of ‘democracy in balance’ (in the sense that economists give to the term) formulated by Rosanvallon (1998). Rosanvallon argues that mass integration parties carried out the precious task of presenting a political image of the social sphere needed to avoid the indetermination of actual people. Only the masses’ lack of social recognition, resolved by the parties of integration (as shown by Pizzorno), assured the contingent equilibrium between the procedural moment and the sociological moment of representative democracy. See Rosanvallon’s valuable study for further detail, particularly on the difficult relationship between modern representation and image-presentation.

33. As a result, the balance between transmission of demands and exercise of the mandate, previously guaranteed by the parties of integration, is lost. For further details on the transformations of representative systems, see the excellent Pizzorno (1992) on the relationship between party change and spread of corruption in contemporary democracies.

34. According to Pizzorno (2007d), the media are an institution conferring forms of recognition that go beyond the traditional forms of recognition conferred by circles founded on reputation. ‘Just as the market abstracts the working process in which each individual worker is involved, so the means of mass communication abstract each person’s process of recognition and transform it into different levels of exposure’ (Pizzorno 1998, 60–1).

35. Reflections analogous to Pizzorno’s, on the sphere of visibility created by the media and the consequent struggle for visibility among political actors in the media arena, can be found in Thompson (1995, 2000).

36. Note the strong similarities between Pizzorno and Manin (1997) on the metamorphoses of representative regimes.

37. The public’s application of moral criteria to political choices favours the increase of judicial power in order to monitor virtue and the correctness of politicians. Pizzorno sets out his thoughts on the relationship between representation and judiciary power, with particular reference to Italy, in Pizzorno (1998).

References


