



Paul Verhaeghe, professor of clinical psychology at Ghent University has published '*Identiteit*' already in 2012 in Dutch, but the book became well known at international level after its translation in German (*Und ich? Identität in einer durchökonomisierten Gesellschaft* 2014) and in English (2014). From his clinical experience as a psychotherapist, he investigated the relationship between identity and socio-economic system, making connections between apparently distinct phenomena, and allowing sudden new insights into what is happening to us nowadays.

Verhaeghe argues that the neoliberalist ideology invades all fields, from economy to daily life, school systems, university and science, health sector and media as well, altering the way we think about ourselves. He touches several topics, addressing ethic, and educational issues as well, offering examples from the health and university systems, concluding with the search for solutions about what needs to be done to improve the future.

### Identity

Verhaeghe traces notions of identity historically, providing an overview of the shifts in Western thinking about the self within an accessibly written historical discussion of the philosophical and social scientific debates. This long part seems digressive in relation to the book's declared subject-matter, anyway it provides a convincing view of the tight link among identity and social historic development. Ultimately, those debates concerning the nature of identity are resolvable into the familiar binary juxtaposition of nature versus nurture.

The author explains that identity is shaped by two basic urges: the desire to merge with the other, and

### Review of the Book:

**Verhaeghe, Paul. 2014. *What About Me? The Struggle for Identity in a Market-Based Society* Translated from Dutch by Jane Hedley-Prole, Scribe, 272 pp; \$29.99  
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the desire for autonomy, distancing ourselves from the other; both need to be kept in balance. We are the product of constant interaction between our brains, or, broadly, our starter kit of genes, neurons, and hormones – and our environment.

Our psychological identity is in interaction with our surroundings because we are always mirroring (Lacanian notion of the mirror) what we encounter in our environment. '*What about Me?*' maintains that identity is interpreted as a construction, and that we build it by accepting or rejecting identity-conferring messages. The process of identity formation will therefore vary with the nature of society. We are all unique because we have been exposed to different mirroring and have made our own choice; and yet to a degree many of us are similar, because the mirrorings of particular groups and particular cultures are to a great extent shared.

To the question of whether human beings are inherently good or inherently bad creatures, he suggests that altruism as well as aggression inhere to higher primates and the cultural environment determines whether empathy or egotism predominates. Verhaeghe expresses the opinion that the neoliberal obsession with the individual at the expense of the community ignores the fundamental human craving for love and hospitality.

The biggest danger is, according to the author, that people internalize neoliberalist views as common sense and apply them in all fields of life, according to the concept of a hegemonic ideology of the Italian social-theorist Antonio Gramsci.

Ethics is effectively about the essence of human nature, and therefore also about who we are. Changes in the ethical sphere spark changes on the sphere of identity and vice versa. For centuries, religion and ideology provided a source of common identity, centring on ethics and a shared sense of meaning. Throwing traditional norms and values overboard results not in perfect freedom, but in chaos and fear, says Verhaeghe.

### Neoliberalism

In economics, neoliberalism promotes the radical programs of deregulation, privatization, marketization, and globalization. The Dutch philosopher Hans Achterhuis is quoted, who highlights an important difference between classical and neo-liberalism. Classical liberals want a strict division between state and society, limiting the intrusion of the state into private

life, while neoliberals seeks to subordinate the state to the supposedly free market, ascribe to the state an activist responsibility to promote the market not merely as a fact of life but as a *way* of life.

Verhaghe cites a case, to exemplify the new working conditions and a dangerous concept of meritocracy: the “Enron society”, a company in which concepts such as “the public interest” and “social service” are displaced by the profit motive, where only very few winners (in predecided percentage) are possible, mortifying the other ones, which are considered guilty because of their lack of success.

He states that ‘meritocracy’ is not bad in itself but how it is applied nowadays is bad, for several reasons: it is only for a few, it forgets that people do not start at the same level and do not have the same opportunities, is decided wrongly and the process has negative consequences. The combination of over-regulation and control system leads to less productivity and less creativity, and in destruction of intrinsic motivation; workers have to devote more time to prove their results than to work, and the quality is lowered further.

The essentials of the new comprehensive value system are competitiveness, the primacy of contractual over all non-contractual human relationships, speed, innovation, interconnectedness, and the casting off of the shackles imposed by traditions.

Neoliberalism has successfully advanced those values that serve its purposes, while suppressing those that confront it with obstacles. The result is a values revolution which has wrought profoundly detrimental changes in our individual identities and personalities and, at the same time, weakened society.

The moral norm is suddenly once more external to the individual. We lose internalised authority; just like toddlers, adults need to be incentivated to follow the rules by means of material reward. Organisations must therefore carry out surveillance, frequent evaluations, which soon come to resemble controls.

The Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre is quoted, who reminds us that even the word ethics *sounds passé*. In his magnum opus *After Virtue*, MacIntyre explores, among other things, the myth of modern moral freedom.

Autonomy and individual control vanish, to be replaced by quantitative evaluation, performance interviews, and audits. Deprived of a say over their own work, employees become less committed (‘They don’t listen anyway’), and their sense of responsibility diminishes (‘As long as I do things by the book, they can’t touch me’).

Disoriented citizens of neoliberal societies may look for satisfying and durable identities in, for example, nostalgic, reactionary, nationalist, or fundamentalist ideas and movements. More commonly, they seek solace in consumerism, increased consumption as a road to happiness. Instead, it results in what Verhaeghe calls “depressive hedonia.”

The neo liberal meritocracy can only function through a centrally directed and rigidly planned

system that measures ‘production’. Anything that doesn’t fit within rigid parameters, anything that falls outside the measuring system doesn’t count anymore, and is deemed unproductive. The yardstick must apply equally to all, measurement must be standardised, and everything is sacrificed to the juggernaut of measurability.

In the contemporary neoliberal meritocracy, a sense of humiliation and hopelessness can lead to despair, more aggression, less confidence, more fear and less participation in community life, revenge and violence stems.

### **Some examples: education, university and health**

The author cites examples from the areas known to him: research/ university and health sector, explaining that today’s pay-for-performance mentality is turning institutions such as schools, universities, and hospitals into businesses. Schools are ‘competing’ against each others („top-schools”, „top-teachers” etc.), even individuals are being made to think of themselves as one-person enterprises.

University education was valued largely for its social relevance, besides the contribution of the scientific research. The aim was to develop critical, highly educated citizens who could place their talents at the service of society. Nowadays the efficiency of education, research, and healthcare is supposed to be measurable; it isn’t easy to measure intellectual work, however much of the new buzzwords (such as educational performance, output, ranking, and benchmarks) might create this impression. The surrender of academic and clinical independence goes hand in hand with an increase of supervision.

About education, instead of moaning about how egoistical and materialistic the younger generation are, we should be seriously questioning current educational theories. The influence of parents and family has shrunk to a fraction of what it once was; while norms and values were once predominantly mediated by the parents, the media today play a greater role.

Excluding the idea that a school can be value-free as every form of education convey values, the author underlines that we need to be more aware of the fact. He describes the biggest difference among the contemporary goals of competence oriented learning and the traditional form of education writing: the *Bildung*, intended as a process of education and maturation, in which an optimally rich culture guarantees a rich palette of potential identification (p.152).

The dominance of neoliberalism is evident in the educational jargon; there are economic terms popping up in educational texts, as well as in the sphere of relationship: ‘knowledge is human capital’, ‘competences are a capital that young people must learn to maintain and develop’, ‘learning is a long term investment’.

About health and disorders, Verhaeghe puts forward crucial questions: Depression often results from a sense of impotence, when people feel powerless to

change their lives; powerlessness and helplessness are among the most toxic emotions, and the first reason of work-related depression is a lack of respect and lack of recognition.

Too much inequality leads to a loss of respect, also towards themselves, resulting in a warped view of the self, disorientation, and despair; high inequality in nations is associated with a laundry list of health and mental disorders.

The last 50 years have witnessed a staggering proliferation of psychiatric disorders. The neo-liberal ideology has harmful consequences on the identity of the individual, and on mental health, even affecting the nature of the disorders from which we suffer: burnout, depressions and performance anxiety, fear of failure, eating disorders, sex addiction, etc.

Many children are diagnosed with ADHS, autism and other DSA. Ellen Key considered the XX century 'the century of the child', and we witness that the XXI century seems to be the 'century of the disturbed child'.

Verhaeghe deplores the socially destructive effects of over-treating deviation, and that psychopharmaceuticals are overprescribed. He sees a resurgent model of standardised medical "illnesses" in psychiatry, with a bloated - Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders - (DSM) that has both reflected and caused the over-diagnosis.

The 'illness model' is widely accepted; it lets everyone off the hook; no one needs to feel responsible for problems. You might even feel a sense of reliefs, and less guilty, argues Verhaeghe, to be diagnosed with an illness, and to incorporate it into your identity in order to excuse your inability to measure up. With so few options and so much pressure to fill the very limited number of slots designated for "winners," having a neurologically determined ailment often feels better than being a failure.

### **The good life**

The book does have a clear thesis: shows the profound impact that social change is having on people and on their identity. Verhaeghe deals with proposals for improvement in the last chapter 'The good life', inviting us to think through a solution. His suggestions are: overcoming the neoliberal ideology, developing value based citizenship, changing economy, work, education and living conditions. The author declares that we need the independent thinking, and individual responsibility in order to change overcoming the risk of the syndrome TINA - (There Is No Alternative).

He is sure that it is incumbent upon us all to reexamine the claims of neoliberalism, to see them for the ideological assertions that they are, and to stop internalizing them as common sense. It is up to us to reengage as citizens, in looking for alternatives, to demand better political choices, and to hold politicians accountable, in order to create a healthy society. It means becoming citizens not just in the voting booth, but above all in the way in which we lead our lives, taking the first steps towards creating that social polity

through the choices that we make.

A new economy should be developed, which must shed the idea of quantitative growth as fast as possible in favor of qualitative sustainability, establishing a new balance between difference and equality, fostering sense of belonging and autonomy, so that values like solidarity move to the forefront.

The author underlines that, if we want politics to be governed by the public interest, we ourselves must promote that public interest, rather than private concerns. I appreciate very much that the author suggests changes to and through values, although it may be not enough.

- 'What about me' is interesting as proposal for interpreting our lives in the XXI century, as it highlights the possible big risks of our society, and emphasizes the responsibility of everyone of us; it is helpful in educational field because of the concept of identity, of the offered explanation for health disorders, and for citizenship education.

To support his ideas, Verhaeghe quotes a number of authors and researches, novel, films etc., mostly in an appropriate way; in some parts we are expected to believe him on the basis of his experience, because some statements are impossible to be proven in a few pages.

Of course, this book fits first of all for the western industrialised societies, there are differences in the different places. It is never possible to find one only reason for all the problems; the faults are never unilateral, anyway denouncing the distortions is the best premise to resize the system. In some countries it could be challenging to think about the role of the justice systems, of the Churches and of the politicians as well, in engaging for a better society.

The book is written in an accessible style, it is aimed at a wider public, not just for specialists; it looks informative and thought provoking, succeeds in addressing common feelings, and in attracting attention. Clear examples are given in order to explain the main arguments and that implies sometimes the need for oversimplification, and of referring to common places, moreover, argumentations are consistent and not superficial.

The conclusion is an optimistic message; the reader gets new insights into the current society, and knows that revolutions of habits are possible, with big common efforts. The book reaches the goal of warning, inviting people to prevent a worsening of the situation, and to engage in improvement.

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