



Social transformation: Genius and madness and the concept of “death of the ego”

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Abstract

We are currently living in an era marked by extreme warfare, economic crises, and deep value conflicts. This landscape reflects, at least in part, a prolonged social obscuration that has increasingly distanced individuals and society from the core values that underpin human identity and the very foundation of a rule-based civilization.

Moreover, a growing confusion has emerged between *purpose* and *objectives*—a widespread inability to discern the deeper existential meaning of human, social, and organizational life from merely functional goals.

Within this context, the concepts of *genius*, *madness*, and the *death of the self* become pivotal. Philosophy and sociology have long explored these dimensions, highlighting their historical and cultural significance.

Genius, often misunderstood or resisted, is a figure of rupture and transformation; madness, in contrast, represents an otherness that challenges the rational frameworks and norms imposed by society.

Thinkers such as Max Weber (1922), Theodor W. Adorno, and Francesco Alberoni have examined genius as a charismatic leader capable of inspiring and mobilizing the masses.

Michel Foucault, on the other hand, emphasized how modern society has managed madness through rationalization and segregation, revealing a collective inability to embrace what deviates from normative expectations.

Today, these themes raise profound questions about the relationship between the individual and society, between authenticity and conformity, and between expressive freedom and social control.

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1. Introduction: crisis of values and modern disorientation

Contemporary society is going through an era marked by wars, economic conflicts and a crisis of values. This scenario reflects a prolonged social obfuscation, which has distanced the individual from the pillars of identity and the founding rules of coexistence.

The central theme of this reflection fits into this context: the relationship between genius, madness and the 'death of the ego'. Elements often considered separate, they instead constitute crucial junctions for understanding the existential condition of the modern individual.

The aim of this contribution is to explore how reason, genius, madness and the death of the ego intersect, through an integrated approach that combines philosophical, sociological and psychological reflection.

2. Theoretical context: definitions and references

Here, 'genius' is defined as an expression of positive deviance and innovation. Its eccentric and divergent nature often leads it to break social conventions, becoming a vehicle for cultural and scientific progress.

Madness is seen here as a form of social divergence, i.e. a mode of thought and behaviour that deviates from shared norms, and is therefore medicalised or excluded (Foucault, 1961).

Rationality is understood as an instrument of control and conformity: a force that imposes adherence to standardised rules, as criticised by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectics of the Enlightenment* (1947).

Finally, the 'death of the ego' refers to the loss of individual authenticity due to the suppression of emotions and alignment with heterodirected models (Fromm, 1941; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947; Foucault, 1961).

3. Genius and madness in historical thought

The link between genius and madness finds its roots in classical thought. Plato (1931), in the *Dialogues*, links madness to a divine inspiration, capable of generating poetry, prophecy and higher knowledge.

In modern times, Friedrich Nietzsche (1886) re-evaluates madness as a creative force: 'there are no wonderful things without something profound, obscure, tremendous'. Karl Jaspers, in his *Genius and Madness* (1959), deepens the relationship between psychopathological experience and intellectual production, showing how madness can act as a privileged channel towards existential truth.

From these perspectives, an evolution of the concept emerges: from classical sacredness to modern pathologisation, up to its rehabilitation in an existential and artistic key.

4. Artistic case studies: genius, crisis and death of the ego

Numerous artists embody the intersection of genius, madness and ego death.

Van Gogh, suffering from psychotic episodes, was interned several times, but during these periods he produced masterpieces such as *Starry Night*. His schizophrenia did not annihilate his genius, but nurtured it, at the cost of a progressive dissolution of the self.

Turner, with his obsessive search for light, developed an increasingly visionary style; Edgar Allan Poe (1845), scarred by grief and addiction, transformed his inner darkness into a gothic poetics; Rimbaud (1871), after an intense creative season, suddenly abandoned poetry; Virginia Woolf (1941), devastated by depression, left a last letter testifying to the end of her struggle with her own identity.

These examples show how the crisis of the ego can become a creative engine. The dissolution of identity does not necessarily coincide with destruction, but can open up a space for an aesthetic reworking of experience. In this sense, the 'death of the ego' can be read as a radical and foundational transformation of the creative act.

5. Modern pathologies of rationality: conformism and alienation

New forms of unease emerge in the contemporary world that can be read as pathological outcomes of hypermodern rationality.

Adorno and Horkheimer denounced how instrumental rationality leads to 'automatic conformity', reducing the individual to a function of the system. Social phenomena such as morbid obesity, extreme isolation (hikikomori), widespread depression and emotional psychopathy are situated within this framework.

Obesity, for example, now affects one third of the American population and reflects a systemic failure in the regulation of desire and self-discipline. The hikikomori phenomenon, with millions of Japanese youths deciding to self-exclude themselves, shows an extreme form of ego withdrawal from society.

These cases are not simply individual pathologies, but symptoms of an exasperated rationality that has marginalised empathy, relationship, and spontaneity.

The individual, fragmented and de-subjectivised, experiences a real 'death of the ego', losing the ability to feel and recognise himself as an authentic being.

6. Genius, madness and the rebirth of identity

In the context of modernity, the traditional ego undergoes a profound crisis, the result of disenchantment and the rationalisation of everyday life. However, the dissolution of identity can open up spaces for new forms of authenticity.

The charismatic genius emerges as a liminal figure, capable of transforming pain into creation, madness into vision, loss into revelation.

The final invitation is to reflect on how exceptional qualities can represent not only anomalies, but also resources for rethinking the human. In an increasingly disenchanted world, the recovery of authenticity passes through a confrontation with madness, with the limit, with the mystery that inhabits identity.

7. Diseases of reason: social psychopathy and dehumanisation

The examination of the drifts of rationality leads one to reflect on current phenomena that are only apparently unrelated to the subject, but are in fact profoundly connected to the death of the ego.

Modern society seems to suffer from a widespread form of psychopathy. We are witnessing a slow but disturbing phenotypic change. Obesity, once rare, now affects a third of Americans: a sign of a systemic dysfunction involving body and mind.

This is not simply a medical problem, but a reflection of a society that has disconnected the individual from himself. One million young Japanese live in reclusion; in Italy, an estimated 100,000 similar cases.

Here we are no longer dealing with genius or madness, but with a new form of 'death of the ego': a condition of extinguishing identity through emotional abandonment, disconnection and loss of meaning. Social psychopathy - understood as the absence of empathy, compassion, participation - represents the extreme outcome of a system based solely on rationality.

8. Empathy, nature and neuroscience: a biological perspective

In this framework, a reappraisal of empathy as the foundation of human identity becomes necessary.

Plato suggested that in order to know, one must abandon reason. In nature, rationality is widespread: bees communicate with mathematical precision. Empathy, on the other hand, is rare: present only in some primates, dolphins, elephants. The latter cry in groups, possessing special neurons shared with some humans. Empathy, more than rationality, represents a fragile and valuable development (de Waal, 2009).

9. The role of passions according to Alberoni

If empathy is a biological foundation of humanity, passions represent its transformative engine.

Alberoni (2001) explored the power of emotions and passions as forces capable of driving individual and collective transformation. Genius embodies the ability to channel these energies creatively.

Madness emerges when these forces get out of control. The rebirth of the authentic self passes through the embrace of emotions and change.

10. Fear, anxiety and emotional degeneration

Among the most pervasive emotions, fear plays an ambiguous role. Darwin (1872) recognised the universality of emotions in animals. Fear, if acute, is salvific;

if chronic, it becomes a source of disease. Persistent fear generates anxiety, causes chronic stress and leads to depression.

In the USA, one in nine people are undergoing treatment for severe depression (APA, 2021). Perhaps we have placed too much value on rationality, neglecting the emotions that make us human.

11. Conclusion: towards a rebirth of the authentic ego

Ultimately, genius and madness represent two radical responses to rationality. Artists and thinkers such as Van Gogh, Turner, Poe, Rimbaud, Nietzsche, Woolf, Mozart, Newton, Einstein and Turing show how pain and eccentricity are often linked to greatness.

Genius transforms society but risks marginalisation. Disenchanted modernity annihilates the ego, but also offers the opportunity to be reborn through vocation and authenticity.

The invitation is to recognise exceptional qualities as an engine of inspiration, and to seek new ways to realise our ego in a world that is increasingly rational, but no less human.

Authors contributions

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