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A SIGN OF THE TIMES?

Identity has been one of the unifying themes of social science for more than a quarter of a century, and shows no signs of going away. Everybody has *something* to say about identity: anthropologists, geographers, historians, philosophers, political scientists, psychologists, sociologists. From debates about the modernity of self-identity, to feminist deconstructions of gendered social conventions, to urgent attempts to understand the renewed vigour of nationalism and ethnic politics, the field is crowded. Identity, it seems, is bound up with everything from political asylum to credit card fraud, shopping to sex. And the talk is about change, too: about new identities, the return of old ones and the transformation of existing ones. About shape-shifting, on the one hand, and the deep foundations of selfhood, on the other.

IMAGE AND POLITICS

One obvious reason for social scientists' fascination with identity is that we have no monopoly on the notion. The advertising industry, for example, has long understood how to sell people more and more expensive stuff by selling them an identity: a 'new look', a 'make-over', a 'new me' (Turow 2011). Goffman pointed out the centrality to advertising of gender identities – and of advertising to gender identifications – a few decades ago (1979). The diversity of identification has increasingly become part of the self-conscious stock in trade of advertising and marketing, in the identification of niche markets and categories of consumer and the careful negotiation of the myriad possibilities for consumer alienation and

offence (Costa and Bamossy 1995). On the other hand, the appropriation of brand names and mass products for assertive and very specific identity projects is increasingly well documented (Lamont and Molnár 2001), as is the more general significance of consumption patterns for identification (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont and Fournier 1992). While anthropology suggests that identification, consumption and display have always been connected, what *may* be new – although I'm not wholly convinced – is our disenchanting awareness of what we're doing and self-conscious collusion with the sirens of the global market.

Moreover, the market in identities doesn't just involve buying new clothes or a new car. Some people seek their 'new me' in different marketplaces, in psychotherapy or spirituality. For others, the pilgrim's way leads to a backpacking 'year out' or the bright lights of the big city. For many of us, however, the pursuit of new or alternative identities never gets beyond our daydreams. The routine stability and constancy of ordinary lives, and the uneven distribution of the resources that are necessary to play the make-over game with any seriousness, are often lost to sight amid all of the talk about identity.

In international politics, to take another example, identity seems to have become a symbolic public good the defence of which asserts a legitimacy that is beyond criticism or opposition. Reified into a sacred and holy apotheosis, identity is something to which everyone has a *right*. It allows the pursuit of narrowly sectional interests to pass – covered by at least a fig leaf of sincerity – as a defence of the ineffable (Malešević 2006). It is a difficult card to trump (although, as ever, another kind of common sense – based in *realpolitik* and the pursuit of business interests – still shapes foreign policies).

Issues of identity are also deeply rooted in national politics. In an increasingly globalised world, politicians far from the extreme right seem to feel perfectly comfortable wrapped in the patriotic certainties of the flag. On the left – such as it is at the beginning of the twenty-first century – 'identity politics' still attempt to appeal to disadvantaged constituencies that are based on shared experiences other than class-based exploitation. Gender is important in this respect and it has become an established basis for politics in its own right. For decades women all over the world have been questioning and confronting their conventional identities and striving to establish more equal and self-determined ways of being women.

Indigenous peoples, too, have begun to identify themselves as political actors, distancing themselves from the metropolis, establishing new relations of difference and similarity within which to challenge unchecked

tourism and the expropriation of environmental resources. Indeed the very act of collective self-definition as 'indigenous' may be an effective political strategy on the international stage (Igoe 2006). National governments, in turn, are discovering that although the well-shod tourist's fascination with the downtrodden of the earth may be as shallow as their life-style holiday – the contemporary equivalent of the nineteenth-century European grand tour, perhaps – it is precisely that which encourages them to spend their hard currency.

Elsewhere, in the former state socialist countries of Eastern Europe, the politics of local identity continues to mushroom in the rubble of bureaucratic centralism. Meanwhile, Russia is reasserting itself and Russians are calling themselves a 'people' again. And no discussion of identity written after 11 September 2001 would be complete without an acknowledgement of the re-emergence of religion as a major index of who's who and what's what. Within and between nation-states, and from the shadows and holes of the few remaining indeterminate borderlands, faith and sect have returned to centre stage, to teach us that modernity may turn out to be not quite what we had expected. Identity, it seems, is the touchstone of the times.

MODERNITY AND IDENTITY

Some recent social science about identity resembles too closely what politicians and advertising executives say. The urgency of the issues at stake may mean, for example, that *what* identity is – or, indeed, *that* it is and that it *matters* – is often taken for granted in analysing the local specifics of messy situations. Less excusable, perhaps, is the celebration of collective or individual *self*-identification, or the presumption that what we buy is *necessarily* an expression of who we are. More critical distance between social scientists and their subject matter may be needed.

Arguments that concerns about difference and identity are historically recent phenomena – and perhaps even diagnostic or definitive of post- or late modernity – are largely the specialist prerogative of social theorists, however. Here is a moderate version of this thesis:

At earlier historical moments, identity was not so much an issue; when societies were more stable, identity was to a great extent assigned, rather than selected or adopted. In current times, however, the concept of identity carries the full weight of the need for a sense of who one is, together with an often overwhelming pace of change in surrounding social contexts – changes in the groups and networks in which people

and their identities are embedded and in the societal structures and practices in which those networks are themselves embedded.

(Howard 2000: 367-368)

This has already been discussed briefly in [Chapter 2](#), and the arguments are not convincing. It's true that *how* we talk about who's who and what's what is historically and culturally specific, so the present epoch will have its own terms and themes. It's probably also true that the *volume* of discourse about identity has reached new magnitudes, if only because global noise and chatter about everything has increased with the population and the widening availability of communication technologies.

It is, however, much too much to say that concerns with and about identity, and its complexities, are definitively modern. Allowing for the issues of the times and a rise in the global noise level, reflections upon identity have a long history. An established sociological and psychological literature about identity goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century and before: James, Cooley, Mead and Simmel come to mind immediately. This is a body of work that remains fundamental to social theory and to the anthropology and sociology of identity. Going back further, Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, for example, published in 1690, included a chapter on 'Identity and Diversity'. About a hundred years earlier, when Shakespeare wrote 'All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts', in *As You Like It*, among other things he anticipated Goffman. What's more, mistaken or confused identity and identity transformations – often involving gender – are such consistent plot devices in the Bard's comedies, in particular, that identity begins to look like one of Shakespeare's core themes. Six hundred years before Locke and Shakespeare, similar themes and issues were important to Indian philosophers (Harré 2000: 64-66). We sacrifice historical perspective if we neglect the variety of intellectual traditions that have reflected on identity: there is nothing intrinsically new about these issues (Williams 2000: 13-30).

This is not to deny the reality of contemporary concerns about identity and identity-related issues, or their definitive modernity. These concerns reflect the uncertainty produced by change: reorientations of work and family relationships; class and status mobility; migration; medical and technological innovation; the poisonous combination of affluence and economic insecurity; the redrawing of national borders; the intrusive reality of global media; the 'return' of religion to global politics; and many other things besides. Our cognitive maps do not always fit

the landscape of others around us. We encounter people whose identities and natures are not clear to us. We may no longer even be sure about ourselves. The future may no longer appear as predictable as it seems to have been for earlier generations. Who's who, and what's what, may not always be obvious.

But change – the confrontation of languages, traditions and ways of life; the transformation of divisions of labour; demographic flux; catastrophe and calamity; progress and social improvement – is not in any sense recent or modern. It is arguably the norm in human experience. It isn't anachronistic, for example, to recognise 'crises of identity' in early modern witch-hunting or in the medieval persecution of heretics, Jews, lepers and homosexuals, or to interpret these in the context of contemporary social change and upheavals (Moore 1987). Or to see in the almost perpetual motion of a city such as Wrocław, in today's Poland – also known, between the eleventh century and the twentieth, as Wrotizla, Vretsław, Presslaw and Breslau, ruled by Poles, Czechs, Germans, Bohemians, Austrians, Prussians and, then, Germans again – struggles about identification: about who's who and what's what in that particular corner of central Europe (Davies and Moorhouse 2002).

Globalisation is a shorthand term for a complex package of comprehensive changes that, in many ways, defined the twentieth century (although some of these processes began centuries earlier). Whatever we think about globalisation's history, it has had an impact on the nature and salience of identification in the modern world. In particular, globalisation means that people are aware of living in a global rather than a local context: 'all the world's a stage' has become 'the stage is all the world'. And this is true almost everywhere we look. Some of the Maasai of Tanzania, for example, inspired by external NGOs and the campaigns of circumpolar and Amazonian peoples, now participate in the international 'Indigenous Peoples' movement, exploiting the symbolic capital that attaches to that global identification in their dealings with the state (Igoe 2006). On a different tack, what it means to be 'authentically' Irish has become, at least in part, defined in complex – sometimes ironic, sometimes not – relations with a global audience, and with a global marketplace in which 'authentic Irishness' is bought and sold (Mays 2005).

Globalisation is also widely believed to have made human life more diverse. This is an important part of the argument, discussed in [Chapter 2](#), that difference has become the dominant (post)modern theme when it comes to knowing who's who. Some of this is obvious and hard to deny: due to vastly increased volumes and speeds of movement and communication, and capitalism's abhorrence of a market vacuum, more experiences

and elective identities are on offer today than ever before, to those who can afford them (or even those who beggar their families in order to do so). On the pavement of any modern city we are confronted with diversity as a matter of routine, everyday expectation. There are, however, three good reasons why acknowledging globalised diversity does not necessarily get us very far.

In the first place, to do so tells us nothing about the meanings of diversity *then* compared with the meanings of diversity *now*. There is every reason to think that in the past, as now, diversity had a range of consequences for people's everyday experience, depending upon historical, local and personal contingencies. Diversity in itself – if we can sensibly talk about diversity *in itself* – may not actually be particularly significant, so whether or not there is 'more' or 'less' of it is unlikely to tell us much about what it means.

Second, the literature about globalisation suggests that, alongside diversity, globalisation brings in its train greater homogeneity, particularly in organisational settings. Ritzer's *The McDonaldization of Society* (2012) is an influential version of this thesis and despite some telling critiques of his argument (e.g. Smart 1999) it would be perverse not to recognise that it has captured something important about modernity. But – much like diversity, in fact – homogeneity may not be particularly important *in itself*, either. If nothing else, it is likely to be mediated by other factors and processes. For example, Hannerz (1992) and others have argued that the economic, political and cultural impacts of being homogenised or globalised may inspire local responses that, in various ways and for a range of reasons, (re)invent diversity in the guise of 'tradition' and 'heritage', reassert existing identifications or customise the global into local forms. To use a word that Robertson (1995) kidnapped from the discourses of international management, this is 'glocalization'. Much like similarity and difference, the global and the local keep each other close company.

Finally, although globalisation has made it more likely that more people will, in the routine of their everyday lives, encounter Others and other ways of doing things, an alternative narrative of globalisation is at least as significant. 'Glocalization' or 'globalisation' are not options that have been available to everyone. The history of the expansion of globally powerful nation-states has been a chronicle of ethnocide and genocide. Hunters, fisherfolk and subsistence agriculturalists have not simply had to adapt, they have in many cases been exterminated. The last of the Beothuk people of Newfoundland died in 1829, the last indigenous Tasmanian in 1876, and the twentieth century saw further extinctions.

Less dramatically, in Europe and elsewhere the nation-state project – the worldwide standardisation of which has been a significant dimension of globalisation – has usually involved the suppression of local and regional ways of life (e.g. Weber 1976). The world is arguably less diverse in important respects than it was several hundred years ago.

So, if diversity is not new, what of the fragmentation and contradiction that apparently (e.g. Woodward 1997b: 15–23) characterises post-modernity, and postmodern identities? If by this we mean that people are identified in a multiplicity of ways, and that these do not always fit well together, producing personal troubles and public issues to which they and others have to respond, then once again the argument about their historical novelty seems, at best, unproven. The great and ancient literatures of the world, religious and secular, seem to suggest that such things are nothing new. To draw upon my Methodist upbringing, the Bible is full of examples of issues and troubles of this kind. The story of Joseph is one such, the parable of the Good Samaritan – with its telling response to a telling question about identity, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ (Esler 2000) – is another.

Change also reveals itself in the intimate details of individual lives, and the privacies of the person occupy a particular and important place in contemporary social science discourses about identity. ‘Reflexive self-identity’ is among the phenomena hailed as peculiarly and diagnostically modern by some social theorists, most notably Giddens in *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), which expands upon his earlier critique of the concept of postmodernity (1990) to take in the intimacies of selfhood and their apparent transformations at the end of the twentieth century. Giddens is concerned to understand the politicisation of the personal, the private and the intimate. He argues that self-identity is a distinctively modern project within which individuals can reflexively construct a personal narrative which allows them to understand themselves as in control of their lives and futures. Apparently, ‘life politics’ have emerged in the capitalist democracies to fill the vacuum left by the decline of the politics of class, and therapy and counselling are now among the characteristic – perhaps even the most distinctive – discourses of modernity (Giddens 1991: 33). To appropriate an expression with its origins in the women’s movement of the 1960s, ‘the personal is the political’ provides the sub-text for Giddens’ argument about our contemporary concern with identity.

This argument, predicated as it is upon definitions of rationality, reflexivity and self-identity that tie them to the modern era post-Weber and post-Freud (effectively foreclosing on any debate before it begins),

is *at least* an overstatement, revealing more about the conceits of Western modernity, and its intellectual elite, than anything else. Where, for example, does it leave the many millions of people, in Europe and the United States, never mind anywhere else, who, for whatever reasons, do not spend much, or even any, time agonising over 'life narratives' and 'personal growth'? Who have other things – not better, please note, just *other* – to fret about? Are they outside the loop of the 'late modern age', stranded in a historical cul-de-sac?

It is also an argument that privileges a secular understanding of both identity and modernity. It is not straining interpretive licence to see in religions of personal redemption thoughtful, *reflexive* responses to 'ontological insecurity' (Giddens 1991: 53). Salvation is as much a project of the self – although that word begs as many questions as it answers – as 'personal growth' or 'psychological integration'. Ideologies of spiritual salvation seek to understand and identify the essentials and the meaning of individual conscious existence no less than ideologies of personal development. Both offer a raft to cling to in the storms of life; in both the relationship between self-deception and self-knowledge is intimate. Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, for example, written about 1600 years ago, is a testament to the possibilities for re-forging the self – personal growth – offered as an example to others. Stepping back nearly another thousand years, one can understand Buddhism as a project for the reformation of the self (Carrithers 1985).

Finally, there is another reason why we should be deeply suspicious of claims for the historical novelty of either diversity or reflexive self-identity. They bear a close family resemblance to other claims about the novelty – and superior wisdom or sophistication – of the here and now. Among the other aspects of the human world that are apparently distinctively modern are childhood and privacy. The smug anthropologist in me wants at this point to insist that arguments such as these may reflect poorly on the ethnocentricity and comparative ethnographic – and historical – ignorance of their authors. However, I suspect that what they really tell us about are the conceits of modernity, and the propensity – even among those who identify with postmodernism – to see the past as no more than a lengthy prologue to the present. Historicism is a pervasive temptation.

PUTTING IDENTITY INTO PERSPECTIVE

Allowing for the reservations that I have just expressed, our concerns about identity in the second decade of the twenty-first century are, of

course, to a considerable extent specific to their moment, as are their contexts and the media in and through which they are expressed. There is something distinctive about where we are now, as there is something distinctive about every time and place. The women's movement, for example, has been a major historical development and force for social change, and distinctly modern to boot. The same can be said about the politics of human rights and anti-discrimination. These are all bound up with identity.

Similarly, we should take seriously Alvesson's recent argument (2013) about the 'emptiness' of modern societies that are increasingly dominated by individualism and consumerism, in which branding, presentation and marketing – which are all concerned with identity – have come to matter more than substance, product and performance. Building upon his earlier discussions of how employees are increasingly, even if subtly, encouraged to identify and present themselves in ways that harmonise with organisational cultures, mission statements and business styles (1994; Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Alvesson *et al.* 2008; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003), Alvesson makes no claim for the historical novelty of such things. Rather, what is new is the degree to which they have come to dominate the modern human world, their ubiquity and pervasiveness.

There is nothing to be gained, however, from labelling notions such as difference, identity or reflexivity – or presentation, branding and marketing – as definitively modern. Are we really to believe, for example, that people did not know who they were, or think about it, before the twentieth century? Or that they did not sometimes practice 'identity work', to try to effect the impression that others formed of them? Some of these claims are simply too ponderous to carry their own weight. There is, for example, the well-known argument that the individual 'subject', having first appeared as a definitive and unique product of the European Enlightenment, has disappeared under conditions of postmodernity (Jameson 1991). At best, this rests upon a notion of subjectivity and agency that is too narrow, too trivial indeed, for sociological use. At worst, it takes the presumptions of modernity too much at their own, self-serving face value. With respect both of its major claims – at the dawn and the supposed dusk of modernity – it can and should be challenged empirically.

Empirical critique aside, there are other grounds for concern about the social theoretical implications of these discourses about (post)modern identity. The disquiets of Brubaker and Cooper and Malešević have been discussed in [Chapter 2](#): by their lights 'identity' has become too overburdened with meanings to mean anything at all. Bendle has also suggested (2002) that the ways in which identity is understood by Giddens

and others¹ – as a fundamental essence of individual selfhood, vital to personal well-being, on the one hand; as evanescent, utterly constructed and situationally contingent on the other – combine to produce incoherence and theoretical incapacity. Although these critiques may go a little too far – and risk throwing out the baby with the bath water – they are necessary and important anti-theses to a self-sustaining body of theory whose authors have forgotten the fundamental importance of systematic inquiry into the observable realities of the human world, increasingly (mis)taken the proper subject of social theory to be social theorists and, one suspects, (mis)understood their own existential crises to be universal problems of the age.

It is nothing new to be self-conscious about identity: about what it means to be human, what it means to be a particular kind of human, what it means to be an individual and a person, whether people are who and what they appear to be and so on. It is nothing new to be uncertain about these matters from time to time, or to think that they are important. It is nothing new to engage in 'identity work'. To suggest otherwise risks assigning most of human experience to a historical ante-room, waiting for modernity to turn the lights on, and reinvents ethnocentrism and historicism under the reassuring sign of postmodernism's break with both. What we need instead is a generic framework for understanding how identification works that will accommodate its roots in human nature as well as its construction and contingency, allowing us to get on with the sociological business of approaching all human experience on its own terms in order better to understand it. The rest of this book offers just such a framework.