

# The politics of identity: making and disrupting identity

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The power of identity to manifest as a unifying and divisive force pervades social, cultural, economic and political relations. Economic crises, war and conflict, struggles over resources and equality, and questions of exclusion and belonging are premised both overtly and subtly in claims about identity. This finds expression at and between the individual and collective level. In the wake of the January 2015 terrorist attacks at the Charlie Hebdo office in Paris, people around the world readily identified with France and values such as freedom of speech with the hashtag #jesuischarlie ('I am Charlie'), and #jesuisparis after the November attacks in the same year. The anti-establishment push-back against globalisation and mainstream politics from both the left and right of the political spectrum invokes questions of identity, to differing degrees. The Eurozone crisis has provoked discussions about the failure of the European political and economic project and identity. The push for independence in Scotland in 2014, and the rise of Syriza in Greece, and Podemos in Spain, also reflected efforts to rethink national and sub-national representation and identity against wider societal and economic crises. In the UK, the June 2016 referendum on EU membership was deeply tied to questions of identity in both the Leave and Remain campaigns. For those supporting 'Brexit', the referendum was an opportunity to 'reclaim' national identity and 'control' over economic and immigration policy and borders. The Leave campaign's saturation of images and rhetoric imagined a restored national sovereignty and identity that proved to be a powerful, if contentious and divisive, discourse. For many who supported staying in the EU, the loss of the referendum was experienced as an 'existential' – or 'Brexitential' – crisis (Spicer 2016), an undoing of an identity that was attached not only to the nation-state (which now appeared different) but also to Europe.

Questions of 'who we are' shape our subjectivities and the world we inhabit,

but the relationship is more intricate than locating identity as a causal factor in human behaviour and relationships. For some time, questions of identity have been fixated on ‘identity politics’, which has pitched class against gender, race, sexuality and other status-based social movements which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in response to post-industrial change. Neo-Marxists upheld class as the main social movement through which to address structural inequality and promote social change (Bernstein 2005, 66). As such, identity politics based on other social status is regarded as a distraction to achieving wider social justice and is thus non-political (despite the intersection of gender, race, sexuality and other categories with class). Some account for the rise in identity politics as an outcome of capitalism’s homogenising tendencies, where identity politics emerges as the working class is weakened by processes of globalisation (Fox Piven 1995) or the left’s inability to address gender, race and sexual inequality (Bernstein and Taylor 2013). Post-election analyses of the 2016 US presidential election have been dominated by ‘identity politics’, particularly the rise of ‘white identity politics’ as an explanatory force for Trump’s success (Knowles and Tropp 2016; Taranto 2016), and the source of Hillary Clinton’s loss. Moreover, the ‘rising American electorate’ of minorities, millennials and women that Clinton relied on failed to translate into votes (Judis 2016; Slater 2016). According to Jodi Dean, the reason pollsters ‘got it so wrong’ has in part been due to assumptions about fixed demographic categories to determine views and preferences. Dean’s critique of the fixation on identity politics emerging from the US presidential election identifies several problems that mainstream analyses have yet to address: ‘the appeal of identity, attachments to it and investments in it’. Hashtag-ready statements of identity, such as Clinton’s ‘I’m with Her’ slogan, utilise what Dean refers to as ‘affective networks of communicative capitalism’, whereby mass personalised media is used by individuals to circulate feelings and opinions, and identify enemies. This form of ‘weaponized identity politics’ does little to understand or challenge the underlying foundations that block solidarities and real capacity for change (Dean 2016).

In the same vein, the need to be attentive to the ‘politics of identity’ remains important, lest we restrict the parameters of debate and fail to thoroughly analyse identity. The politics of identity can be a wider lens through which to examine seismic and everyday phenomena, because a politics of identity is concerned with *how* identity works, and the effects (and affects) it *produces*. When we speak of ‘identity’ we are not simply classifying but, rather, engaging in a complex series of meanings, intersections and possibilities of being, and relating that construct to the fabric of social, political, cultural and economic life. Identity underscores how collectives and individuals interact, their subjectivities, and how they manage complex problems and challenges. Naming and categorising is a vital part of identity work and is political. But

understanding and analysing *how a politics of identity works* requires further questions. Writing before Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election, psychologists Stephen Reicher and S. Alexander Haslam maintained that Trump's success was attributable not only to his political rallies, which were carefully orchestrated performances ('identity festivals'), but also to his ability to be a successful 'identity entrepreneur' – 'in essence, his ability to represent himself and his platform in ways that resonate with his would-be followers' experience of their world' (Reicher and Haslam 2016). When elites enunciate their vision of nation and community, what sort of politics of identity underscores such discourses, and how does it structure and produce specific debates about ourselves (and others)? How is identity performed and performative? How do language, discourse and narrative shape meaning and identities, and what 'work' do emotional and affective cues and appeals do? How do we use technology, media, images and other forms of communication to express ideas about identity? How is power deployed in claims about identity? In our 'post-factual' age, where untruths and inaccuracies are consumed and circulated as 'truth', and established understandings of politics and society are fraying, questions about how we form our identities and see others hold great importance, because identity plays a role in how we are constituted and how we regard others, and has meaning for our future choices.

### Problems of identity, approaches to identity

Although identity pervades the human experience and constitutes the subjectivities of individuals, nations, groups, ethnicities, religions and other collective formations, it remains a 'slippery' concept (Buckingham 2008, 1; Connolly 1991, 64; Lawler 2014, 1). Analyses often begin by invoking the Latin derivative – *idem* ('same') – which establishes identity as referring to 'identical', or the notion that we are identical with ourselves but also others (Buckingham 2008, 1; Jenkins 2008, 16–17; Lawler 2014, 9). Dictionary definitions, however, impart an older, 'bureaucratic' or 'jurisprudential' usage of the term, which is concerned with legally naming or associating 'things', such as the legal name for an entity or individual (Descombes 2016, 4; Fearon 1999, 8). The political usage of 'identity' in English-speaking nations is only a recent development, traced to Erik Erikson's coinage of the term 'identity crisis'. Erikson's psychosocial work of the 1950s and 1960s examined the loss or weakening of identity in adolescent subjects and soldiers returning from the Pacific in the Second World War. 'Identity crisis' came to signify an inability to maintain a consistent self (Descombes 2016, 17–18; Fearon 1999, 9; Stokes 1997, 2). Changes or challenges to established identities invoke notions of crisis and uncertainty. In this vein, political psychologists have elaborated Erikson's concept of identity crises further through ontological insecurity,

which refers to the idea of certainty of self, or the ‘subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice’ (Mitzen 2006, 344). In the context of globalisation – the opening of borders, rapid communication, proliferation of technologies, movement of peoples, trade, markets and the spread of ideas – core understandings of identity are seen to be breaking down and developing in different ways. Social theorists have drawn attention to the critical implications for human subjectivity that are part of these processes, particularly in the ‘posthuman age’ where processes of globalisation, information- and bio-technologies impact subjectivity (Elliott 2016, 2). Dislocation, job losses, economic and social changes and cultural shifts affect not only routines but understandings of self and one’s place in the world. Despite many arguing that such changes promote new opportunities, there is also a withdrawal into a defence of the self, and a desire to reaffirm self-identity (Kinnvall 2004, 742; Parekh 2008) or appeals to ‘authentic’ identities. Globalisation brings about a desire to return to an imagined homogeneity in the face of such changes, evidenced in the rise of right-wing populism across Europe, North America and elsewhere. The more porous nature of identity is also reflected in how citizens see themselves. A BBC World Service poll conducted in 2016 found more people from emerging economies identifying themselves as *global* rather than national citizens. This was particularly the case in Nigeria, China and Peru, where over 70 per cent of respondents saw themselves as global citizens. The same poll showed the trend in industrialised nations, such as Germany (30 per cent, the lowest since polling began in 2001), to be lower, explained by economic pressures and immigration (Grimley 2016).

Knowing ‘who we are’ is a foundational claim about identity, which Jenkins defines as the ‘human capacity – rooted in language – to know “who’s who”’. This basic form of categorisation contributes to social reality; furthermore, our own self-perceptions are ‘intimately related to who we think others are, and *vice versa*’ (Jenkins 2008, 5 and 12, italics in original). Efforts to analyse identity involve categorisation, such as identifying personal, societal, corporate and collective levels. These divisions are predicated on national, cultural, religious, economic and ideological grounds. Among scholars, there is agreement that identity is a process (‘identification’), but they differ to various degrees on the question of whether it is a *thing* that individuals or groups ‘possess’ or whether identity determines behaviour or actions (Buckingham 2008, 1; Jenkins 2008, 5 and 13). Various approaches focus on explaining identity or using identity as an explanatory tool to establish causality (Fearon 1999). Traditional theories of international relations, for instance, have a limited view of identity, assuming that the identities of states are pre-given. Rationalist theories, such as realism, argue that states are ‘like units’ and behave according to their capabilities and interests. For liberals, it is a

mosaic of individual and group interests that are contained within the 'state' (Guillaume 2010, 13). Yet, individual and collective identities cannot form without exposure to and engagement with the outside world and others; it is through interaction that identity forms, and the relationship is co-constitutive, a point taken up by social constructivism in international relations. Here, identity explains the behaviour of actors and is central to how interests are defined through social interaction and intersubjective meanings rather than given (Adler 1997; Fierke and Jørgensen 2001; Hopf 1998; Wendt 1994).

The tendency to regard cultural, national or religious groups as a singular identity is likewise problematic, because 'solidarist' approaches deny the multiple possibilities of identity, obscuring how we engage, refer to or prioritise our different identities and associations, depending on context (Sen 2006, xii). Actors experience a hierarchy of multiple, and at times competing, identities. Singular conceptualisations of identity also fail to consider intersectionality, where other axes of difference such as ethnicity, religion, caste, ability, gender and sexuality alter the meaning of an identity category or intersect with additional forms of domination or subjugation (Crenshaw 1991). Sociologists have long understood identity as a process undertaken in interaction with others, in social and cultural contexts. From Mead's symbolic interactionism (1934) to Goffman's dramaturgy (1956), sociologists draw on varying metaphors for the way that identity is 'done'. Fenstermaker and West's (2002) conceptualisation of 'doing difference' and Butler's 'performativity' belie that there is any true self underneath the doing; this has ontological implications for identity as a concept, implying that identity itself is an 'empty' category, 'real' only in so far as it is 'performatively constituted' through citational practices (Butler 2011, 1999).

Categorising identity is complicated, because it is multiple, relational and processual, rather than primordial or given (Berger and Luckmann 1991, 194; Guillaume 2010, 12–9; Lawler 2014, 5–6). Moreover, temporality, binaries and discourse have significant meaning for how we understand identity. Identity varies over time and context, and does not remain static. 'National identity', for example, is not singular but is the product of contested and multiple readings and hierarchies of identity. Claims to an innate national identity are problematic because the nation-state is never coterminous with itself over time and space. There is no 'natural' identity, particularly when it comes to the nation. Rather, identity is 'congealed into a "fact", a "given", precisely because it had been a *fiction* ... an unfinished task' (Bauman 2004, 20, italics in original). Likewise, Connolly speaks of the tendencies to 'congeal established identities into fixed forms, thought and lived as if their structure expressed the true order of things' (Connolly 1991, 64). For Stuart Hall, there is a 'constitutive outside' to identity and the unity upon which identities proclaim are built on power and exclusion (Lawler 2014, 12). Deconstructing

the binaries of identity (self/other, homogeneity/heterogeneity, or sameness/difference) demonstrates the exclusionary relationship that operates in such oppositional constructs, and how each binary has a hierarchy of value or violence (Hall [1996] 2013, 18). Through language and discourse, the contingent and unfixed meanings associated with ‘stable’ identities come under closer scrutiny, revealing silences and power relations. Discourses are ‘systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects’; they draw the ‘political frontiers between “insiders” and “outsiders”’ (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 3–4; *cf.* Mole 2007, 18). Foucault’s genealogical works were careful interrogations of the ways that discourses shape the subjectivities of individuals to understand themselves in certain ways, based on the assumption that ‘relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth’ (Foucault 1980, 93). Identity matters because it constitutes subjectivity – but how that subjectivity is constituted reveals its inherently unstable and problematic nature. Discursive approaches to identity unveil the power relations that underscore identity and meanings (Fairclough and Wodak 1997) and set the parameters of possibility and subjectivity (Campbell 1998; Epstein 2011; Guillaume 2010; Weber 1998; Zehfuss 2002). These ‘post-identity’ approaches ‘reconceptualize identity as a category through dissections of subjectivization, positionality and normativity’ (Cryderman 2013, 19).

Beyond these continuing debates on the nature and content of identity, it has also been argued that we should ‘forget’ identity, or that identity as a concept is exhausted. The latter view has been taken up by the ‘post post-identity’ or ‘anti-identity’ camp, which ‘extol[s] universality and censure[s] identitarian logic’ (Cryderman 2013, 20; Moran 2015). Brubaker and Cooper (2000, 1) argue that identity has been overused and oversubscribed as an analytical category, and has come to ‘mean too much ... too little ... or nothing at all’. Fearon, on the other hand, suggests that rather than ‘banish’ identity, we might do better to ‘dispense with “identity” and analyse instead the politics of social categories and the political implications of desires for dignity, honor, and self-respect’ (Fearon 1999, 37). Our contention is that identity still matters, and continues to evolve both materially and conceptually with significant political, social, cultural and economic effects. Without an exploration of the ways in which the politics of identity works, or underscores how we define and set the limits for possible human action and activity, we omit an essential analysis of the human experience. It is also imperative that claims made under the guise of identity be critically examined. The chapters in this edited collection aim to do this across a range of empirical case studies that cover the Asia-Pacific region, Europe, South America and the Middle East,

through primary material and interdisciplinary frameworks. The rationale of this edited collection is to explore the ways in which ‘identity’ is constituted, contested and ruptured. We aim to explore how identities continue to be performed, transformed and (re)invented through place, space and discourse, their contingent and fluid nature, and the tensions and constraints that result. The collection gives space to how we can imagine possible alternative identities, or reconstruct identity in ways that produce different meanings and possibilities in collective and individual subjectivities. It also points to the co-constituted and contingent nature of identity across the individual, state and international level.

### Themes: making, displacing and contesting identity

The book is divided across three parts and themes. The first part is concerned with the ways in which identity is established and consolidated, and the inherently contingent nature of identity in the processes of its construction. In Chapter 2, Chris Mudaliar examines the discursive role of constitutions in identity making in Fiji after independence. In the post-colonial Fijian context, constitutions are read as discursive tools that are imbued with historical significance and questions of power relations. Since 1970, Fijian identity has been defined in ethno-nationalist terms; efforts to reimagine a different Fijian identity under the banner of *iTaukei* in the 2013 constitution put forward by Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama contextualises the complexities of national identity in the Melanesian context. In Chapter 3, Katie Linnane explores how political elites have imagined Australian identity in their foreign policy articulations. Focusing on the different conceptualisations of Australian identity in the 1990s under prime ministers John Howard and Paul Keating, Linnane examines how the contrasting political ideologies of both leaders drove political and public discourse on national identity and shaped Australia’s past and future self-image in significant ways. In Chapter 4, Sarah Smith explores constructed gendered identities in peacebuilding through the case study of Timor-Leste. The chapter focuses on women, arguing that constructed gendered identities mediate both the representation of women in post-conflict settings and the roles women can undertake in building peace. Their exclusion through constructs of gendered identities represents complications for notions of inclusivity in peacebuilding. Gëzim Visoka continues in the vein of peace and conflict in Chapter 5 with a focus on the agents of peace and how ideas about their role and identity inform practice. This study considers how place, habitus and performative roles shape the identity of agents in practice. In doing so, Visoka aims to bypass exclusionary dichotomies and offer a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of post-conflict societies through critical hermeneutics and human geography.

Establishing identity also involves ruptures or forms of displacement, which the second part of the book examines in closer detail. Hind Ghandour shows how Palestinians in Lebanon have reinterpreted ideas of identity and agency through the process of *tawtin* (naturalisation). *Tawtin* has been a controversial issue because it is underpinned by notions of assimilation to the Lebanese state, which has been opposed by many Palestinian refugees. Ghandour's study has important implications for understanding identity, rights and citizenship against a backdrop of intractable conflict, the movement of people, agency and identity. Along a similar path, in Chapter 7 Riccardo Armillei's focus on the Romani people in Italy also engages with questions of agency and identity. Armillei examines how space has shaped identity. Here, the Romanies were treated as a problematic nomad community, the solution to which involved interventions that were based on the 'camp'. This ghetto-like space was used as the main tool for the re-education and inclusion of the Romani population within mainstream society. Yet from this space – the *campi nomadi* (nomad camps) – a 'bottom up' opposition formed. The Romani communities living in the camps saw themselves not as victims but, rather, as fighters or warriors, deploying the camp to their benefit. Alongside marginalisation, the camps system also produced significant practices of resistance and self-ghettoisation within the camps. In Chapter 8, Louise Pears explores the interaction of popular culture, geopolitics and identity through her examination of the popular television series *Homeland*. Drawing on narrative theory, the chapter foregrounds how stories matter – in particular, how television shows are a site of gendered, raced and nationalised identities and how audiences make sense and meaning of such tales. In bringing together work on identity, narrative and security and international relations, Pears demonstrates how popular culture serves as an important shaper of identity, but that this process is not entirely given or one-way. The ability of audiences to interpret notions of identity, security and power indicates that the politics of identity requires multiple meanings and contexts. In Chapter 9, Helen Berents examines internal displacement and belonging in Colombia, foregrounding the lived, everyday experiences of those internally displaced by conflict and marginalised by poverty. Questions of citizenship, power and everyday politics actively construct identity to resist stigmatisation and exclusion. In attempting to find ways of recognising such communities beyond the restrictive formalised bounds of government definitions, a local, everyday-based politics of identity and belonging emerges.

The final part of the book examines contested identities. Efforts to reconstitute or produce a different identity are the subject of Chapter 10, where Annika Bergman Rosamond and Christine Agius examine the redirection of Sweden's security and defence policy towards a more militaristic turn through questions of identity and memory. The chapter explores the accompanying

shifts in identity that make this transition seemingly ‘natural’ and in keeping with Sweden’s tradition of active internationalism, peacekeeping and its self-image as a ‘good state’. Significantly, the chapter examines how memory discourses work in circuitous ways to justify and naturalise new actions, policies and practices whilst reconstituting identity in the process. In Chapter 11, Ted Svensson examines the complexities of discrimination in the case of Dalit identity through a focus on the expansion of the scope of Dalit sameness. The notion of a shared, expansive Dalit identity beyond local or national contexts has allowed both for a global layer of activism to develop and for formerly disparate groups or communities to affiliate themselves with the cause against casteist perceptions of pollution, hierarchy and status. Svensson examines the outcomes and consequences of this development and its implications for identity. Paul Kramer engages assemblage theory and the notion of the ‘public sphere’ to understand how populations are governed in Chapter 12. Using the concept of the queer common, questions of identity are explored through space and sexuality in the case of the Gezi Park protests in Turkey in 2013 and the role of the LGBTQ community in state–societal relations. Kramer’s study points to a complex relationship between those considered ‘outside’ the state and those considered to constitute the ‘norm’ and institutions of the state. In the final chapter, using queer theory, Lucy Nicholas critically explores the limits to tolerance discourses for fostering truly positive intergroup relations in a context of prejudice. Using Australian case studies that seek to go beyond tolerance for minority groups, towards celebration of differences, the chapter outlines how the contact hypothesis from social psychology can be developed and extended alongside queer ethics to offer a practical solution for how people may have better, more enabling relations with individuals different from themselves, without collapsing back into homogenising group identities. It considers the model of ‘allophilia’ (love of the other) from social psychology, alongside queer theory ethics, to sketch an alternative sociality that is enabling but not homogenising.

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