Part 1
Theories of identity
A history of identity
The riddle at the heart of the mystery of life

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Think of it this way: If \( A = B \), then 0, which is to say: zero, zed, nothing. For anything to be thought, any given \( A \), whatever its content, cannot be exactly identical to any given \( B \). In social life, this is clearly true and practically well understood. If I am \( A \), of whichever personal name (the name being just an arbitrary personal marker, as Erving Goffman put it), then I cannot be exactly the same in all essential aspects as any given \( B \) for if I were, then, as Mark Twain or some one like that once said, one of us would be useless.

This riddle, of sorts, is quite evident in the course of ordinary human life in, at least, the modern worlds where we like to think of ourselves as having a Self, if not a soul, that provides a degree of interior regularity which social theorists have come to call self-identity. It seems also true in virtually every field of intellectual or scientific practice. If each and every \( A \) (where for now \( A \) can stand in as a name for any given thing of potential value) were equal in value to each and every \( B \), we would all be dead or, more elegantly put, the universe of living things such as we experience and know of them would have reached the maximum degree of entropy. All energy would have collapsed into a mass of sameness because, at the deepest analytic level, energy is information of a special kind and information systems depend entirely on differences of all kinds – electromagnetic, sexual, grammatical tables, maps, climates, digits (both anatomical and cybernetic), money systems, economic trade, and so on, and on, without seeming end.

We could consider this riddle on even more grand metaphysical and ethical terms – without death, no life; where \( A \) (death) is not \( B \) (life). Dying is much more than, as many say, an end of life, or others say, part of the life process. Being dead is something of another kind, a marker whereby, at the least, life itself (measured by both medical and religious rules) is the state that ends the complex bioenergetic information system that is life, whether the life is mine in particular, or yours, or the life of a species or an ecosystem, or at the extreme (a theoretically likely extreme) the end of all life itself.

Hence, the mystery of life, at the heart of which is the riddle of identity theories of all kinds: life, on all levels, is a vitality that for the time of its duration is, if not entirely, stable and fixed. Life (a category so general was to verge on an incoherence of its own special kind), thus, is a structure of sorts with any number of moving and functioning parts that together must work
more or less well enough to keep the ship of structured life afloat. When a structure hits its fatal iceberg and sinks to the bottom, it ceases to endure because it ceases to function, which is to say it ceases to be a vital organism that is salient enough to organize its working members. There is an iceberg out there waiting for all structures. The penultimate mystery of life is: when will it strike? But the final mystery is: why it must be there?

To make the riddle personal, hence social (which is where it interests social theorists most keenly), from the point of view of life what is the purpose of death or, more broadly, and for present purposes aptly, what does it have to do with the nature and history of identities? The answer, in general: death in the sense of a pure Zero is the key to everything at least in a strong metaphorical sense. Even the fervidly religious in some faiths will grant that Death is at least a Beyond by which the value of a life lived is measured. Death could be said to be the one condition in which A = A, where for all intents and purposes life and the wide-awake living recognize what is technically called its Zero Signifier. A = A is pure identity. We know that there is no such thing. Practically speaking, we cannot be identical to ourselves, anymore that we can be precisely the same as any given B, or all of them for that matter.

Pure identity – whether as a mathematic abstraction or as the Zero Signifier of ordinary meanings – is then the utter lack of difference and if there were no differences there can be no information, no energy, no vitality, and no life; of which none more pure than the Zed of the Dead. Yet, in practical life, it is very hard, probably impossible, to grasp the meaning of A = A. We may even strive for it over the course of time or in a line of action – and when we do we are seeking the ideal of pure identity of purpose or sense of Self. But, when we are sane about the strivings, we usually pull up short when (or if) we come to see that pure identity is what Søren Kierkegaard (1941 [1962]) called the sickness unto death or, more plainly put, it is the condition of pure boredom in which one might wish to die even if he cannot (that was Kierkegaard’s point).

The Zero Signifier, by several names is a common concept in many fields, having begun as a discovery of linguistics. When it comes to languages, the sounds we are able to form with vocal cords, tongue, lips, and the express of air are a closed structure, unique to a given language system. At the heart of each and every system of spoken speech there is a zero sound against which all vocalizations are articulated. I cannot tell you what it is in my languages (though I am sure that there are theories on this). It is hard, which is to say virtually impossible, to speak of in so many words because, by its nature, that zero vocal sound is inexpressible. It is silence of a distinctive kind – less a silence that interrupts the sounds of speaking (or music, writing, or much else), than a pure silence behind all locutions. We know, however, that something like this exists because when learning a foreign language there are certain sounds that require sometimes years of training and experience to vocalize. I cannot, for example, roll the Spanish “r.” I can at long last pronounce the French “ieu” (as in the name Bourdieu) but only after a year-long study under French nuns in Paris. I was slow. They were patient. English simply does not have these sounds. They are part of the blank, empty, zero signifying space that allows English speakers to do what they do and accordingly others, say Mandarin speakers, to do what they do (which after some experience sounds lovely in its way but impermeably strange to me).

But it is not just language, but many (perhaps most other) systems of thought and expression that depend on a Zero Signifier. There would be no economic value, if all commodities on the market place were exactly the same. Economic exchange, as Marx taught, depends on quantitative equivalencies and qualitative differences. I do not need your pen if I have one of the same kind. I might want it, even feel I need it, if the pen I had was to me of lesser quality, in which case I might offer two or three of mine for the one you have. And so on. A = A is the zero circumstance of pure qualitative and quantitative equivalence, or identity, at which point there is no value or meaning or, at the extreme, no life. Everything begins with A being
unequal to B qualitatively such that an arguable N (which is to say, number) of either one can excite an exchange, from which life goes on. But any fool on the street without a certificate of social incompetence knows enough not to trade, say, his shirt for the identical one worn by other – unless, say, his is dirty and the other’s is cleaner; or the exchange of equivalents is part of a flawed potlatch or some other gift-giving ritual of a local tribe.

Thus, if we are to trace the history of the Identity concept without trying to cover the whole of life and history themselves, it will be necessary to keep the riddle provoked by the silence of \( A = A \) always in the back of our minds, while moving on to the practical considerations that since Descartes, or perhaps Augustine, have led over many centuries to the modern concept of identity as a social category – to, that is, a self-identity assumed to be somehow or another at the core of social life (which, after all, is nothing more than a series of exchanges of different values). That history, thus limited, will be further limited because in many ways the riddle of self-identification as we moderns (or, if you prefer, late or postmoderns) encounter it had to await the invention of the Self concept (in respect to which we shall hold off for now in concluding whether the Self in the locution concept self-identity is itself a kind of surd or zero sign of the problem of identity itself).

The ancient history of identity, such as it was

One of the habits of modern cultures, especially those of the Occident, is to assume that cultural innovations of modern times (say, for simplicity’s sake, since the sixteenth century or so) have their analogues if not their origins in ancient times. The historical basis for this habit is twofold. First, in a sense it is true, but especially again in the West which enjoyed (or suffered if you wish) a long feudal or medieval period in which the dominant religions of the West and its peripheral regions (notably those to which Christianity, Islam, and Judaism had spread) took some of their key ideas, in part, from the Hellenic cultures that had earlier dominated the area. These borrowings may be thought by some to have been limited to later Judaism and early Christianity, but as it concerns the medieval period it was the key Greek texts – especially those that Islamic (by Avicenna of Baghdad) and Moorish schools had maintained and used in Northern Africa and Iberia (notably Averroes of Cordova) – that were introduced primarily in Paris in the twelfth and thirteenth century. Thus, Roman Christendom’s Scholasticism, an invention almost exclusively of St Thomas of Aquinas (1225–1274), is through and through Aristotelian in its philosophical framework. Similarly, the Italian Renaissance in the several centuries following this Aristotelian renewal in Paris was, likewise, a fusion of Christian iconography and Greek and Roman artistic form. This is the truth of the matter.

The second point to note in respect to the idea that the modern era was born at a deferral in time in Greek and Rome is that the fully modern academic scholarship in Europe and North America in the nineteenth century were based on primary learning of the Greek and Latin languages, and also the cultures. Thus, among the educated elite, Plato and Homer, Cicero and Virgil or Ovid were the familiar authors of high culture in the era before mass public education. The persistence of classical languages and learning made it perfectly natural that so much of the modern university system insofar as it was devoted to the mastery of letters as of science was devoted to the history, language, literature, art, and above all philosophy of the classical Hellenic world.

This digression into the disputable origins of modern thought is worth the while when it comes to the history of so thoroughly, even utterly, a modern concept as the Self and its ability to identify itself, reflectively. There is on the surface very good reason to suggest that the Greeks especially never really had a clear-cut concept of what modern culture calls “the individual”
which is to say the locus of a Self (as distinct from a soul) in respect to which the individual is thought to be capable of identifying itself. Thus, as Charles Taylor found in his essay on Plato in *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (1989), the major Greek philosophies had, at best, a feeble sense of what today we call a Self and certainly of a Self able to engaging in Self-identifications.

What the Greeks had, conceptually speaking, was the soul concept, which from the Greek term *psychos* we derive the modern ideas of psyche or, even, mind – though the latter is a stretch one encounters in translations of classic Greek texts such as Plato’s *Republic* (360 BCE). But in the *Republic* (importantly not a psychology but a political theory), one searches in vain for anything like a concept of the individual. Something like what we today would call an individual (in the sense of an autonomous actor) does of course present himself in a shadowy way but always as a member of a category such as *the just man*. In Plato’s famous dialogue between Socrates and Thrasytzmachus in the early sections of the *Republic*, one encounters the idea of a just man, but, in the latter’s futile argument with Socrates, the just man is never more than a member of a stronger class. Where Thrasytzmachus falters is in his admission to Socrates’ relentless questioning that “justice is the excellence of the soul, and injustice the defect of the soul.” Thus, in passages like this one, the modern is tempted to say that there is to be found a precursor of the modern concept Self. Yet, since a Self – in the modern sense of one who is capable of recognizing herself as a distinctive A who is not B – does not appear.

Where Plato offers in the *Republic*, and elsewhere, a direct analysis of the soul is, again interesting, when it comes to his just as famous comparison of the forms or categories of social formations to the tri-partite structure of the soul. The soul comprises knowledge or wisdom, anger among the passions (the overcoming of which is honorable), and appetites (also among the passions of which gain or greed is prominent); to these there are the corresponding “the three classes of men – lovers of wisdom, lovers of honor, and lovers of gain” (344). To the extent that Plato allows for anything like what moderns call an individual, it is in the ideal of wisdom as the controlling force against, even honor, but also the bodily passions in general. But, again, it is the social and political necessity that trumps the unique individual. Here, at the end of the *Republic*, Thrasytzmachus is again rebuked by Plato’s assertion of the power of “divine wisdom dwelling within” for without this (and he grants that it is not widely achieved) it becomes necessary for an “external authority” to govern “in order that we may all be, as far as possible, under the same government, friends and equals.” Hence, justice is not the will of the powerful but of the wise.

It would be extreme to say that there is nothing here to which we can trace modern ideas but, in the end, Plato’s divine wisdom is an eternal form that resides in the soul which is, in effect, in constant struggle with the bodily passions. And when it came to Aristotle it was these forms that dominated the soul all the more. Though Aristotle allows for versions of Plato’s aspects of the soul, what fades away is even Plato’s thin commitment to the principle that wisdom is the active agent of anything like an individual. Aristotle, for one example (from end of Book I of *The Nicomachean Ethics* (W.D. Ross translation)): “In speaking abut a man’s character we do not say that he is wise or has understanding but that he is good-tempered or temperate; yet we praise the wise man also with respect to his state of mind; and of states of mind we call those which praise, virtues.” And, for Aristotle the wise man is the one who contemplates the eternal virtues. Even Charles Taylor, again in *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, who does his best to find an aspect of the modern Self in the Greeks (particularly Plato), concedes that at best they offer a moral source for the Self concept: “Just as the eye cannot exercise its function of seeing unless there is reality there and its properly illuminated, so reason cannot realize its function until we are turned toward real reason, illuminated by the Good” (Taylor 1989: 124).
It is far beyond what is possible in this essay to make the comparison of the Ancient Occident to the traditional Orient. But it is important to say, by way of that incomplete comparison, that though there are indeed elements that could be read, as we say, as concepts of a soul/self in the Greeks, in the Orient many of the dominant religions do not even go as far as Plato. Buddhists, for example, begin with three principles of life: impermanence, suffering, and no-self (for two of many examples from modern Buddhist teachings, see Trungpa 2009; and on no-self see Chödrön 2002). In this respect, as many have said, Buddhism is as much a psychology as a religion but in either case, the Self concept (as it is discussed by contemporary Buddhist teachers) is explicitly denied. As Buddhist teachings have come down into the West, they are usually in the form of advice given for the practice of Enlightenment. One finds instructions as to practices that lead to the avoidance of the distractions of the mind and the contemplative methods that, in focusing on the breath, bring impermanence into the practice by which, in time, and in principle, suffering is relieved by, as some put it, the in-breath of a painful experience and out-breath which allows the mind to accept the impermanence of no-self. Though Confucian, Hindu, and Taoist practices are more practical ethics than psychologies, there the practices of learning and right action are those readily assimilated into a fusion with the collective and political life. Except in certain modernized versions – and of course in the general influence of Western thought in the East – one is hard put to find in traditional Oriental cultures and practices anything like the modern idea of a Self-identifying individual.

Returning to the Occidental history, after Plato, one must wait until Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) before anything like a Self concept, much less a principle of identity, emerges. To be sure, Augustine drew from Plato, as he did from Christian and philosophical writings of the late Roman period. In *The Trinity* (dated between 400 and 420 CE), Augustine naturally begins with an exposition of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity – God as Father, Son, and Spirit. But, quite remarkably, a little more than halfway through he turns his attention to what can be called the first fully coherent psychology of soul that allowed for a principle of identity.

Let the mind then not go looking for a look at itself as if it were absent, but rather take pains to tell itself apart as present. Let it not try to learn itself as if it did not know itself, but rather to discern itself from what it knows to be other. How will it see to act on the command it hears, *Know Thyself*, if it does not know what “know” is or what “thyself” is?”

*(Augustine (400–420 CE) 1991: 295)*

There could not be a stronger rebuke of the Greek slogan to know thyself which, in effect, depended on knowledge or wisdom but seemed entirely to lack an active idea of the self one is advised to know. Also in Augustine’s *The Trinity* there is a tripartite theory of mind as memory, understanding, and will. At first these may seem to bear a comparison to Plato’s soul, except that memory is the element that allows for the possibility of self-knowledge which, for the Bishop of Hippo, was that which was suppressed under the conditions of sin. But as his discussion continues, Augustine more and more lets in elements of self-identification, even in the theological doctrine that we do not know that we will die, but we can think death, as one of the fundamental differences by which the self or soul or mind understands, at the least, its limits in its difference from others, thus, by implication, its self-identity. This is a very long way from modern thought. But it is an important step toward what would come to be, a good many centuries later.

It is often said that Augustine was the father both of medieval Catholicism and of early modern Protestantism. It is in the latter connection that the lineage of modern theories of an independent Self began to surface. It is said (rightly I think) that in Christianity a reformulated
Platonic idea surfaced in the early Church (notably St Paul and author of the Gospel of John), resurfaced in Augustinian, then came to fruition in the Protestant reformers. The very idea of the Protestant Reformation was that it was the individual alone who acts in faith to believe and, by the time one gets to later Calvinism, the believing individual is meant to demonstrate faith by acting as if he one were among the saved – this by the hard work of building up God’s world. This is a story very familiar to modern social theorists through Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–05) which is the *locus classicus* of the historical argument that modern individualism (in the form of a secular spirit of capitalism, or this–worldly entrepreneurial disposition) arose in the Protestant and by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries emerged as an ethic of the secular individual as the agent of future progress, including economic progress.

Needless to say the Protestant line of development was not the sole nor (some would argue) even the major source of the well-identified Self. There were, of course, many other movements that ran parallel to Protestantism of which Rene Descartes (1596–1650) is usually cast as the first to break through to a concept of self–reflection, thus of self–identification. It is always trite to mention “Cogito, ergo sum” – “I think, therefore I am.” Yet, it is hard to find a more evident place to locate the beginning of systematic thought based on, and directed toward, the existence of a Self – here, the “ego” (or later the “I”).

Descartes was of course very much more than the one who coined a slogan of modern thought, but that slogan was the lynchpin of his method of systematic doubt directed, in *Discourse of Method* (1637), on himself, on which he based the pure rational method whereby his own existence could be proven and that proof was, of course, the ability to think – to doubt yes, eventually to think rationally in science, but primordially to think as the sign and assurance of the existence of the individual being.

Charles Taylor (1989: 154) sees Descartes as taking up what Augustine began and setting it in newly modern terms. To be sure, Descartes, among seventeenth-century thinkers from Bacon and Hobbes to Spinoza and Leibnitz, and others, were crucial to what we can call the founding generation of the modern thinking subject. Here began the still-enduring debate between the rationalist method (mostly Continental – notably Descartes, Spinoza and Leibnitz) and the empiricist method (mostly English and Scottish – notably Locke and Hume). This was important because it utterly smashed, in due course, the stranglehold of Aristotelian scholasticism of the later Middle Ages. In this sense, the seventeenth-century philosophers of reason in both traditions were working parallel to the new methods founded in the sixteenth century by Protestantism and before that in the Renaissance. The philosophers of the seventeenth-century Age of Reason were of course also the foundation of divisions of philosophical thinking on politics, which was the principal of sources of later social theory. The rationalists mostly in France were founders, in effect, of the tradition of the social contract which, though identified mainly with Rousseau, was a general principle found in a long lineage – awkwardly even in Hobbes, but clearly in Montesquieu as well as Rousseau, in Saint-Simon and Comte in the nineteenth century, and prominently in Durkheim on the cusp of the twentieth century wherein social order was first conceived as the original social category. By contrast, it hardly need be said, the English and Scottish lines of thought (to which Hobbes on margin also belonged) held to the primacy of the individual in ethical, political, and economic life – hence the ideas of individual rights and freedoms, of the centrality of utilitarian self-interest in economics, and also even of the much fabled free market and minimalist state – concepts that owe to Locke, Hume, Mills, Bentham, even Adam Smith, the English lineage.

Thus, very early in the modern period, was established the deep structural tension of the Enlightenment in which the opposing principles of a social contract and social justice were set against those of individual rights and freedoms. The introduction of the modern individual was
a necessary move that appeared in parallel in the religious movements of the previous century where, when the Weberian formula on Protestantism is added in, were the preconditions of a Self able to reflect on himself to the end of calculating future projects whereby his interests will be advanced. The very prospect of a modern Self able to see himself, if not always clearly, for what he is in the present, as occupying a social or economic position sometime in the future is, as it turned out, absolutely crucial to disentangling the Self from the soul of the ancients and thus to setting the course for modern theories of identity that did not surface until, actually, late in the nineteenth century.

We must give ourselves permission, at least on this occasion, to skip over the crucial advances made by Kant, Hegel, and even Marx. Kant sought to free the thinking individual from analytic reason by proposing a comprehensive philosophy based on practical reason that, strictly speaking, was neither rationalist or empiricist as they were conceived in the seventeenth century. Hegel, of course, took up the idealist version of self-consciousness and projected it onto the dialectic movements of history itself. Except for glimmers here and there (and of course in *Phenomenology of the Spirit*), Hegel’s grand scheme was less a psychology than a philosophy of History, with a capital “H,” that was a necessary correlate of the principle of practical actions leading to historical progress. And Marx, whose philosophy of historical materialism – almost empty in respect to the historical freedoms and autonomy of the historical subject – began with a strongly Hegelian theory of reification or alienation of the universal man who was, precisely, the one requiring the working-class revolution to overcome the dominating power of the bourgeois revolution. None is an identity theorist, in our sense, but all were already, even as they differed from each other and what came before, committed to the Zero-signifying principle that A cannot purely equal itself. For them all differences were essential to practical, historical, and political action and their philosophies were, in effect, proto-philosophies of the dialectic of these differences in human history.

Identity, at long last, enters

It would not be until quite late in the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth that the Identity concept would come into the form by which we use it today. Why so late? The most succinct answer might be the one offered by Georg Simmel in the opening lines of his famous 1903 essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life”: “The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external cultural and technique of life” (Simmel 1971 [1903]: 324). This indeed was a widely shared concern of the day, and remains so today. One finds it in Weber’s famous figure of the iron cage of the “enormous cosmos” of capitalism and rationalized modern life undermining the humanity of the individual subject. It appears in Durkheim’s theory that society and society alone can provide the individual with sufficient moral guidance to overcome the violence created by too extreme a commitment to individualism (or as he put it in *Suicide* in 1897, egoism). It is apparent in Marx’s idea that under the capitalist mode of production the human subject is alienated from himself, hence from the social world about. And, more generally, Simmel’s lament is consistent with the fact that, with rare exception, modern social thought investigated the social problems arising in the modern industrial city and state in contrast to the simpler more traditional (and in theory more “human”) habits of the simpler agrarian life. As the “sovereign powers” of society, as Simmel put it, loomed all the greater, especially in urban life, so individuals (who had possessed a sense of their individual identities only vaguely since the sixteenth century or so) came, one might say, to take themselves seriously as somehow at risk in the then new world order.
One might ask, then, in what ways was the modern metropolis all that different from the sovereign powers of the polis, or of despotic regimes, or the great empires, or of the feudal lords, or of the church or the Hellenic gods, and so on? For which the simple answer would be that, without a self-conscious sense of the Self concept, however large or menacing the prevailing societal order may be, the sense of threat to the individual could only be felt if the culture allowed for a sense that one exists qua individual – as an individual meant to think, act, and be on his own terms – and to do so with some resolute sense of her subjective purpose. Hence, the irony that because of advances in philosophical theories of knowledge and ethics after Descartes and Hobbes, the general concept of the subject thinking of, and acting against, a world of objects arose long before the Identity concept. This is why I have spent so many words tracing equally the emergence (or non-emergence) of “the individual” as a condition for the Identity concept in the current sense, after Simmel’s generation. It is also why, before I am done, I will expend more words on a related but quite different ethical concept – individualism – which is linked of course to a theory of the Individual, and thereby bears on identity as such, but is a distinct set of troubles for identity theory itself.

The earliest, and clearest, late modern statement of the identity problem as linked to an individual psychology of the Self owes to William James in *Principles of Psychology* (1890). Here the key essay is the chapter “The Consciousness of Self” in which James offers what is surely the clearest early definition of the social self: “Properly speaking a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him” (James 1982 [1892]: 281). In this line is everything that is at once distinctive and troubling about the Identity concept – that in complex societies individual identity owes to our being identified (“recognized”) by others. It requires a modern (even as Simmel said, metropolitan) social environment in which the practice of identification is a common practical accomplishment. Reaching back many centuries to Augustine you can begin to see how hard a struggle it was for this notion to surface in a social sense because, with Augustine in the fifth century, the kernel of self-identification was stated as a recognition of differences – and, in passing, we might add, that the fall of Rome in 410 CE was likely in the background providing Augustine a sense of urgency to the question of how one survives when living in a fallen empire. Still the normal urgency of identity as the recognition of Self had to await a modern world wherein, over time, different individuals lived as individuals with each other in close quarters.

But, of course, James’s social self concept has its own set of problems. If the individual has as many selves as there are those who identify him or her, who is he or she after all in the welter of recognitions? James offers a somewhat ambivalent answer. On the one hand he proposes a spiritual self that would be the Self of all of the social selves in the interior life. But this idea never achieved much attention for the simple reason that it seems to be a kind of warmed over theory of the Soul. Where the better, if still not satisfactory, answer lay was in James’s idea of the pure ego from which he derives the sense of personal identity in a formula that is at once scientific and practical: how can one say that “I am the same self that I was yesterday” (316)? when there can be and are many social selves, and when the individual lacks the armament of a strong spiritual self, how indeed does one identify himself as the same from day to day? The multiplicities of the modern social order would seem to make this possibility at least very hard to explain much less to act on. Yet, the very sense of self-identity is, at least, contained in James’s aphorism.

No one before James tried so clearly to set up the self-identity dilemma which became, in many ways a staple of subsequent social theories in the Pragmatist tradition he helped found. Charles Horton Cooley’s famous idea of “the Looking Glass Self” (in *Human Nature and the Social Order* [1902]) follows James in the principle that the interior “I” of the Self sees itself as
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others see it. In an even more compelling way, James’s student W.E.B. Du Bois in *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) wrote of the double consciousness of the American Negro arising from, again, the Self defined by historical circumstances. The self or soul of the American Negro, however, is differentiated from the dominant social others by the contempt with which American whites looked upon the Negro—a contempt that shaped the souls of Black folk, equally for their misery but also for their unique and individual personal strengths.

But, of course, the definitive development of a social solution to James’s dilemma of social self and the need for personal identity is widely thought to have been George Herbert Mead’s teachings, collected in the book *Mind, Self, and Society* (1962 [1934]). Mead’s solution (1962: 195–6) lay in the proposition that the Self engages in an interior dialogue between the “I” (or, roughly, the pure ego) and the “Me” (James’s social self). Mead proposes, thereby, that Self-identity is a dynamic process, never ending, in which, as new social impingements affect one’s interior sense of identity—the “I” reacts and shapes what Mead supposes to be a continuous sense of self-identity or, at least, a symbolic flow of constancy. Hence one of his more charming observations that the “Me” of this second becomes the “I” of the next. Mead’s ideas were of course the beginning of the line of American social theory that came to be known as Symbolic Interactionism which has spawned numerous advances in our understanding of self-identity in modern life. Whether or not, this extension of the pragmatist line of thought solves the problem is unclear. The common criticism of Symbolic Interactionism is that—even in its most advanced forms later in the twentieth century—an inner dialogue and its entailments does not go very far toward accounting for the “sovereign powers,” the large social structures of modern life that clearly affect how an individual thinks and acts as an individual. But, here with James, American pragmatism and its emergent traditions at least the problem is strongly put. If pragmatism as a social theory was weak on the question of social structures, at least it put the contradiction at the heart of identity in a way in which subsequent thinkers could determine how to use it or get around its troubles.

But, and again most evidently with James, the identity problem as we stated it at the beginning remained hard to resolve. If A = A is the Zero condition of identifications of all kinds this essentially nonsensical equation serves as the silent primordial impossibility—that A = B—from which springs the prospect of meaningful identity and when it comes to social identities no prospect is more perfect. The reason James balked in his theory of personal identity is that it is fully evident than an individual cannot ever be the same A she was the day before. She might be one who is similar in some ways, but if social realities impinge on personal identifications, then to some degree self-identity must change or at least adjust. One is always more of a B (or one might say A-) over time than the original pure A. This was the issue George Herbert Mead was trying to resolve with the on-going dialogue of the “I” and the social “Me” but it is very hard to get eventually to anything like James’s Self of selves if the dynamic is ever ongoing.

Clearly some more radical approach is required. One arose in Europe in the two decades following James’s *Principles of Psychology* in the writings of Sigmund Freud. From his first major work, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), through quite a number of changes in his thinking over a long life, the one constant in Freud’s thinking about the individual’s mental life is that it is always under assault on several fronts. Just the same, the mind is possessed of a crucial survival mechanism—that of putting off the emotional charges arising from within and from the external world into the Unconscious; hence the centrality of dreams as the mechanism for releasing the interior tensions when the mind is at rest. The dream is never fully accessible in the waking life but Freud’s talking therapy as it has come down to us is an attempt to use what is remembered of dreams as the principal element of the wide-awake mental means by which the relaxed patient is able to bring into consciousness those disturbing emotional charges.
Before going any farther, it must be said that Freud's scheme, in whichever of its several variants it is read, does not sound like an identity theory. But it is, insofar as it radicalizes even so unruly a theme as perturbations caused by the social self. In a fashion, what Freud did (without using the language of James or others in America) was to call the social self what it was—a target of stimuli from the outer world; and those external stimuli did not serve the needs of the "ego." Freud's ego is a deep interior, but half-conscious element of the psyche. Against the ego, facing the outside world, Freud famously posed the Superego, which is the source of the moral demands of society, mediated in childhood through the parental objects. The Superego is the judge of the social world, always promising punishment for misbehavior. In this aspect of Freud's thinking he simultaneously pulls together what the pragmatists left loose and incoherent in Mead's theories of the "I" and the "Me."

Freud, in effect, endows the social factor of the individual subject with qualities that Simmel and Weber wrote of without fully appreciating their force. The "sovereign power of society" is indeed overwhelming, as Simmel taught, but in being so it is also punitive and restrictive Freud added. Weber had some sense of this in his fear that the modern world could crush the humanity of the subject (and in this sense he was closer to Marx than many suppose). But Durkheim was utterly naïve on this element of the social bond. Society, for Durkheim, guides the individual into productive social life where his only identity is assured and when society withdraws the individual withers unto death.

In his basic formula, Freud clearly was less naïve than Durkheim and more thorough as regards the true nature and status of the individual than, certainly, Weber and Marx but also the American pragmatists who followed James. Yet, and again, the question can be put: Is this really the modern Identity concept? Could it not be said to be a step backwards into earlier murky waters wherein both the Self and the individual drown? On this latter point the answers would be Yes and No, in that order. Strictly speaking, if the standard for the Self concept is anything too close to the principle that seems to haunt James that there must be a pure ego (in which A = A), then Freud clearly rejects this line. No one, to my knowledge, has put this better than Anthony Elliott: "Freud laid the foundation for an understanding of the self as radically divided, fractured and ambivalent; he detailed a concept of the individual subject as always at odds with itself" (Elliott 2001: 49). Following Elliott, we can agree that in Freud there is no Self in the pure ego sense of the concept, but there is an individual even if one is always unsettled by conflict.

But what does this mean for the Identity concept in addition to the powerful honesty Freud introduces as regards the individual in the modern world—honesty that Marx, Simmel, and Weber among others pointed to but could not explain on their own terms? Here, of course, the individual is fraught with the conflict that these other thinkers realized. The difference Freud makes is that of bringing the conflict into the open. Here, of course, we must let drop the other shoe in his famous tripartite theory of the psyche—that of the deeper recesses of the Unconscious, namely the infamous "id" that forms the interior (and more powerful) line of assault on the work of the ego. The "id" it could be said attacks the "I." The id is the source of the drives, or the oddly translated, primitive instincts—of which the two most potent are Eros and Thanatos; or the drive toward building up constructive relations and its opposite—the drive to destruction.

Taking Freud at face value, what these drives do is aggravate the already punitive and destructive work of society through the Superego by energizing deeply mysterious interior (even natural) desires that put the ego in a quandary.

The task [of the ego] is self-preservation. As regards external events, it performs that task by becoming aware of stimuli, by storing up experiences about them (in memory), by
avoiding excessively strong stimuli (through flight), by dealing with moderate stimuli (through adaptation) and finally by learning to bring about expedient changes in the external world. As regards internal events, in relation to the id, [the ego] performs that task by gaining control over the demands of the instincts, by deciding which are to be allowed satisfaction, by postponing that satisfaction to times and circumstances favorable in the external world or by suppressing their excitations entirely.

(Freud 1949 [1940]: 14–15)

If we were to allow Freud’s ego to serve as at least a homologue to the Self concept, then this passage alone indicates the extent to which, at least with respect to the forces of the external world, he had a more realistic explanation for the troubles of personal identity individuals actually encounter in real life. In a word, the battle with the world is not always won, but we do remember, flee, adapt, or change things. This is not exactly the image of a pure ego maintaining self-identity through the course of obnoxious and multiple stimuli, but, truth be told, this is what most of us go through in trying to be something like the A we imagine ourselves to be without becoming a pure B. The Ego’s work in controlling the internal impulses is harder to accept for some—in part because the drives concept is so far beyond traditional methods of empirical research. But we do, again if we are honest, recognize that whatever we call it—an Ego or Self—this aspect of our Self-being is very leaky. Desires cause us (against our better judgment) to love over much (often repetitively the wrong kind of person for us) or to do and say destructive things (that often end up injuring us). That impulses sneak through, not only in dreams, which are entirely about wishes, but also in repetitive behaviors, is a fact of individual life that the idea of a pure ego reconciling differences cannot explain.

So then what becomes of identity with Freud? For one, the starkness of it all notwithstanding, identity in Freud is the first fully analytic notion that accounts for the fact that identity as lived can never be a pure A = A—that the Zero Signifier of selfhood is never pure and never present in conscious life. Or—to put it otherwise, as Freud on the Unconscious—the ego is always at work against a Dark Continent that is always mysterious and for the most part silent. In other, better, words, the ego is a working faculty, working against threatening differences that arise from the interior and come down from the outside world.

Still what in Freud is identity? “Identification is known in psycho-analysis as the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person” (1959: 27). First, and foremost, identification is emotional and, second, just as important, it is early—very early in the preverbal state of infancy. Identity is not so much an accomplishment for Freud as, in his word, a cathexis (or powerful attraction) to another person. But, and here he turns the tables on us, the other person is never purely a real object in the emotion-laden mind. The original object (using the Oedipal example Freud often gives) of the mother as an object to the infant, she (normally) is eventually introjected (that is taken into the emotional experience) of (infamously) the boy. The object of identification thus is projected or displaced, never real and stable as such; and if this is so, then it follows that the individual’s identity is constantly disrupted by the presence within of illusions of objects without. Identifications are experienced as necessary objects of one’s life, when in fact they are traces seen through a glass dimly (dreams in particular).

Freud’s is not exactly the kind of Identity concept that modern thought had been seeking over all those years. But, however fragmentary his theory of the individual may be (not to mention his many digressions and errors), Freud did wrench open the Identity concept in productive ways that, since, have led to more honest and many fruitful developments, as we will see. For the moment, however, let the assessment rest on the very practical question that can be derived from the working formula of this essay. If, in regards personal identity, A = A is
impossible, then how much is any individual personal A identity ever and always edging toward becoming or being a B, if not a B like another other? And where is that result gained (if that is the word), if one does not account for the unruly striking differences deep in the Unconscious interior? Whatever the final answer, if indeed one can be had, Freud at least allows us to question whether the centuries-long struggle to reconcile subjects and objects, individuals and social structures, reason and empiricism, and so on and so forth, cannot be advanced by new tricks of the theoretical trade but by coming to terms with the fundamental fact of social life – that the social individual is not, and can never be, a rational miniature of the social macrocosm; nor can she be merely a source of agency and autonomous action. This is because historical structures, though themselves fragile and permeable, always hold the upper hand in the differences; and they hold that hand close to the chest – in the interior struggle of the ego to preserve individual life, a struggle it cannot win, but must not lose.

**Developments in identity theory since 1920, and the social assaults on individualism**

In 1930, Freud published one of his most explicit essays of social analysis, *Civilization and its Discontents*, in which, in effect, he extended his dual drive theory to society itself with special attention to the evident spread of the Death or Destructive drive that was still, a good decade after the end of the First World War of 1914, threatening the very core of European, hence modern, values and culture. By 1930, when Freud wrote, the unimaginably worse was already in full evidence, especially in the German-speaking parts of Europe. Elsewhere, the signs of global economic collapse and the rise of Fascism were evident. These signs and their eventualities as they so bloodily came to pass would make Simmel’s and Weber’s dire warnings about the threats of the modern era to the human individual, even humanity itself, seem mild by the contrast.

Thus began a series of twentieth-century attempts to account for self-identity – attempts that were at once more sociological and historical than any before, but attempts that turned on a later developing practical application of the ideal of the uniquely identified individual – the Individualism concept. In the history of the Identity concept, individualism is a tricky concept – one might even call it a tangent. In one sense, it is, for the most part, a kind of practical ethic of the personal life in which to be an individual is to be what men (or certain men, we must say) are expected (and privileged) to be. Where individualism is symptomatic of the troubles of the Identity concept is that by the mid-twentieth century, in the period that so shocked Freud and others in Europe, the ethic was itself under assault due in part to the gradual but evident erosion of the social status of the bourgeois classes in the West, but strikingly, after the Depression of 1929, in America as well.

Nearly a century before the early terrors of the 1930s, the term “Individualism” was first used in the 1830s by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* (1835). “Individualism,” he said “is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures, and draw apart with his family and friends” (1969 [1835], 506). Tocqueville was, to be sure, referring to what then was a distinctive aspect of American social life where, as is well known, individualism (in the more technical and conceptual sense) has always been more salient than in Europe. Still, the definition foretells what would come to pass in different, but not unrelated, ways more than a century later – that the individual as a moral being is somehow meant to find himself apart from “the mass of his fellow-creature.” In 1835, in small town America, Tocqueville had in mind a quality of individual life that, to be sure, was only truly available to the bourgeois gentleman. In Europe, where class standing
A history of identity

and social hierarchy were then much more powerful than in post-revolutionary America, individualism was a much less salient idea. This surely is why Tocqueville, always a keen observer of social life, was struck by just how powerful individualism was in America. American culture, especially early in the nineteenth century, was effectively a culture of the individual. It was a political and social, not to mention economic, order in which individual freedoms prevailed over social justices and in which even the ill-formed new American bourgeoisie was then deeply suspicious of urban life with its growing masses of industrial workers. Marx, though he was thoroughly familiar with American life, could not have written at length about the primacy of class conflict had he been an American.

In America, individualism has always trumped class in the European sense of the world – which is one of the reasons why Marx was not read widely in the US until later on the twentieth century. Thus, also, the nascent bourgeois classes Tocqueville observed in the 1830s were transposed in the 1930s only partly into a working-class movement. After the Second World War even this oppositional class was more or less absorbed into today’s middle classes (which included an upper working class or lower middle class and in time an upper middle class just shy of the lower upper class), bourgeois values and ideals (largely borrowed from Europe) began to fade away. In America, the Crash of 1929 spelt the beginning of its decline in a quarter century of economic crisis and war after which, from 1945, a time of affluence that in turn sharpened the idea not of the value of the bourgeois gentleman but of the near-sacred importance of the hard working middle classes.

In Europe the story was different. For a much longer time, the bourgeois gentleman remained the model for the good, so to speak, cultural identity. In the long run, Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) did not win the day for his defense of what came to be called high-culture (for which in England the purported elite values of Oxbridge was a recognized instance). Arnold’s most famous line is “culture . . . is the best that has been thought and said in world” (1869: x). He was, thereby, suspicious of the threat to the integrity of society not only of the uneducated masses but also perhaps even more of the new bourgeois entrepreneur, devoted to the technical life of crass profit making. Still, what endured longer in Europe than ever in the United States was, in social terms, the crucial cultural identity of the elite gentlemanly class whose vocation it was to preserve the highest values of national culture that were the only hope to prevent social anarchy. While it would be a bit too harsh to accuse, say, Durkheim of a similar idea, it does remain a fact of his life that this small-town boy made his adult life on the basis of the highest learning available in Paris, from which he taught the ideas that moral education was the necessary protection of the individual from the ravages of individualism or, again, egoism.

In *The New Individualism: The Emotional Costs of Globalization* (2009), Anthony Elliott and I offer a somewhat more detailed history of individualism (and its relations to identity theory) than is possible here. But, in brief, that story is one that began in the 1920s and 1930s with the emergence in Germany (then in exile in America) of what we now call the tradition of Critical Theory. Its key founding figures, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, lived through the Fascist terrors of the Nazis. As social theorists what struck them hard was the ease with which Hitler was able to overwhelm the masses by a pervasively effective propaganda machine. Their joint manifesto, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), tackles the problem for which the critical theorists in this tradition are famous. The project of Enlightened modernity was put at risk by the events of the twentieth century even as it remained the chief hope for what would later be called a politics of emancipatory knowledge. But in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the most famous of its essays is “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” in which they declared, as in subsequent writings, their fervent criticisms of mass cultures of all kinds – from radio and
Charles Lemert

film to music, even jazz: “The culture industry endlessly cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2001: 111). This long, still vibrant, tradition was, often implicitly, founded in the concern they witnessed in the 1930s and 1940s in Europe of the vulnerability of individualism to the manipulations of mass culture. Theirs was not, by any means, a critique of the same order as Matthew Arnold’s in 1869. Theirs was shaped not by general theories of the masses, but by actual historical experience of just how easily even high-culture intellectuals, the bourgeoisie, as well as the masses, could give up their individual freedoms to the worst sort of political ideologies. The problem they identified remains acute today, which is why their line of critical political and social thought remains vital to our understanding of political and cultural life and, not incidentally, to the fate of democratic individualism in post-Second World War democracies.

That post-war era was very different in America that, especially in the 1950s, enjoyed an affluence that was due to its industrial might built up in the Second World War. This led, as is well known, to a period of unrivaled prosperity that indeed filtered down to the working classes – men and women who had served the war effort, either at home in the manufacturing sector or abroad in military action. As the American economy converted to the production of consumption goods including many of the new gadgets and machines applicable to domestic life, there were jobs aplenty. Thus began, in the 1950s, new social and commercial innovations that had never been available before, at least not to the newly affluent working and middle classes. Automobiles and washing machines were available in local retail markets. The mall emerged in this era as the cathedral of consumption. Television entered the home as a popular and principal medium of family entertainment. And, strangest of all, the “teenager” came into existence, now as the youth whose school years were prolonged and whose purchasing power was enhanced.

By 1950, very early in these developments, social criticisms began to describe the danger of these new forms of social life. Two in particular were, and remain, important documents in the twentieth-century history of the Identity concept. One was David Riesman’s *Lonely Crowd* (1950) in which he and his coauthors bemoaned the threats of consumption culture to the central character in American cultural life – what Riesman called the “inner directed” individual or (since a great deal of Riesman’s thinking is owed to Max Weber) the hard-working productive individual imbued with a spirit of capitalism. The figure of the inner-directed individual had become not only the dominant ideal of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American popular culture but also, as we have seen, in many ways it was the figure behind the early twentieth-century Identity concept. The “I” of personal identity (in both James’s and Mead’s formulations) was in effect the sturdy disciplined individual of, first, small town bourgeois America, and then of its expanding working and middle class of the high industrial period. Still today Americans brag about the superior “productivity” of their workers. What Riesman and others argued was that the inner directed man was giving way to the other-directed individual. As the middle-level corporate workers who were forced to conform to prevailing values and to become “team players” in order to climb the ladder of success, at the same time, with money in their pockets, they also became consumers of cars, suburban houses, faddish clothes, and well-equipped leisure life styles.

The irony here is that as other-directed conformism worried the social critic (and for good reason) and their worry was based on the solid evidence that the new post-war life (at first in America, a decade plus later in Europe too) was somehow the life of a new kind of individual – one at once more isolated from the masses as she retreated into dull individualized suburbs, shopped for cars and televisions that further isolated family life, and tried to come to terms with growing teenagers who were, like their parents, bored with the suburban or corporate life. They, the youth, were the focus of a second important theory of post-war individualism – Erik
Erikson’s writings of the same period on the identity crisis of youth. For him the aimless inter-regnum of the teen years, a product of economic and social changes, created an identity crisis that would, as Riesman also thought, eventually become a crisis for American national character. As life became more contradictory and fluid under the pressure of changes in personal life and individual values, so the precise status of the individual becomes troubled: “We must try to formulate the way in which self-contradictions in American history may expose her youth to an emotional and political short circuit and thus endanger her dynamic potential” (Erikson 1950: 263).

The contradictions of American life had always been there lurking behind its cultural devotion to the primacy of the individual and its freedoms. Yet, Erikson and Riesman, writing from quite different points of view, both contributed importantly to an understanding of the crisis of the individual – hence of the individual’s ability to identify his unique qualities. They saw that those qualities of individualism were aggravated by sudden changes in what both of them called American national character. For the moment, however, the point is to note that, quite apart from the enormous differences between America and Europe at the time, and thus between the critical theorists of German descent and the more Native American social critics, the period from the 1930s through the 1950s gave fair warning of changes yet to come.

One of those changes in the understanding of individualism and identity was the emergence (actually a good many decades later) in the writings of European authors such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, and others in the 1990s, of the individual (like the world itself) as necessarily, inescapably reflexive (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). At the time, their prominent theory of identity as a social problem was nurtured by the dramatic changes in the speed and nature of global exchanges – travel, the Internet, migrations, multiculturalism, and related phenomena. In a certain sense this third new movement in the study of individualism can be explained by the enormous pressures associated with globalization. As individuals traveled (not always for pleasure or business, sometimes to escape starvation and civil strife), they encountered new social forms. One might even say, remembering William James’s first slogan, that they encountered new worlds in which the others there encountered really could not recognize them any more than they could these others. In this period, and still today all the more acutely, an individual’s identity could not be explained even by the complicated task of dealing with the social powers of one’s own society. It is one thing for middle-class individuals to have a social self as well as the mannered methods by which their social inferiors or superiors recognize them. One’s social status and his sense of personal worth may in principle be elevated or depressed depending who recognizes him and how. But it is quite another matter that the Korean grocer or Pakistani taxi driver is himself inscrutable (largely and often because of language problems) and, at the same time, the newly immigrated merchant or driver simply is not familiar with the local signals appropriate to the giving and receiving of identity recognitions.

All too simply put, writers such as Giddens and Beck proposed that in this sort of complex globalized circumstance the individual was forced to adopt a reflexive identity. This is an idea that goes far beyond the pragmatists theory of the “I” reflecting on and adjusting to her “Me” stimuli. Gone is the prospect that a mere inner dialogue could resolve the situation, an identity challenge that is ever present because the character of complex, multicultural, fluid, and global worlds will not let the individual rest. The new reflexive individual’s sense of personal identity was (and remains) a bold, even necessary, theory of self-identity in the late modern world. There can hardly be any doubt that among the many (well-off and marginal alike), the ability to adjust one’s self to the fluidity of global world – adjustments that include learning new languages, new manners, moving to different more opportune parts of the world, and much else – is a new fact of life that complicates the modern Identity concept.

At the same time, in The New Individualism, Elliott and I also note a trend verging at its
extremes on the pathological emotional costs of globalization – those who through body sur-
geries, sexual experimentation, various therapies, and Internet lives and relationships, and the
like – who essentially lose their sense of themselves in the self-transformations they undertake
trying to catch up with the world. This is something more and more alarming than the idea of
self-reflexivity, and it stands as a deeply disturbing trend of early twenty-first-century life.

What is the lesson of this short history of individualism and identity from the 1930s through
and after the 1990s? At many points the twists and turns of the major movements have not been
identity theories at all. Yet, from the German critical theories of the manipulated individual,
through the American social criticisms of a slippage in natural character that dissipates the notion
of identity as a forward-thinking project of an ideal self, to the theories of self reflexivity brought
on by the pressures of global process, at least two significant factors entered the discussion of
the Identity concept. One was a renewal and development of the specific and historical roles
of (again Simmel’s phrase) the sovereign powers of society. Fascism and mass media, consump-
tion culture and conformism, globalization and the reflexive imperative were all as much social
theories of larger – much larger – social forces than anything that had appeared before. One
might protest that certainly Marx, Weber, and Durkheim offered theories of the evils and/or
benefits of the new capitalist and industrial orders of their times. They did, of course, but in all
three cases (though less so with Weber) they did so at a cost to their ability to provide a sense of
the individual’s ability to attain what Weber might have called subjective meaning or certainly
what the earlier classically liberal economists thought of the primacy of individual freedoms.
The twentieth century was a time of trial for many of the great nineteenth-century early mod-
ern ideas. When it came to Self theories, or theories of the individual, thinking seemed to break
down into two groups: a society-first line in which the individual is lost in the welter of social
impressions; and an individual-first line that established individual identities as a property of the
free, in principle autonomies, Self. Neither was completely satisfactory, even though both did
their best to point to the plight of the individual (as did Weber, Marx, and Durkheim) or to
the social effects on self-identification (as did James and Mead and others in the traditions they
spawned). What came to pass, by contrast, in the twentieth century after the 1920s was a series
of identity theories (whether explicit or implicit) that saw the individual as in a quandary of loss
or brave self-reflexivity.

Yet, important to say, in the same century and up through the late 1980s and early 1990s,
there was another set of developments that contribution a fresh and challenging element to the
modern history of identity studies.

Identity-politics

As the modern history of the individualism concept worked its way through the thicket of twen-
tieth-century troubles, another movement – one arising from outside the dominant centers of
intellectual authority – was making its way into the core and its allies at the global centers. In due
course, this movement would come to be called, for a time at least, identity-politics. Before getting
into the details of what identity-politics had come to mean, we can state that, as a general rule, it
is comparable to the three stages of individualisms in the twentieth century in that identity-politics
was a debate precisely over the question of whether identity is an interior quality of the individual
or a social category individuals could enter. The major difference this alternative tradition imposed
was that, more times than not, it did not arise out of specific and detailed references to prevailing
social crises such as mass media, consumption orientation, and globalization.

At the same time, even when a good bit of identity-politics theory made little or no reference
to structural, historical transformations, the impact of global history was very often quite evident
or, at least, detectable. There could be no better illustration of this rule than the first sociologist to use the phrase “the politics of identity.” In fact, one of the most thorough and explicit, if controversial, theories of the politics of identity was written by the inventor of the phrase and of a startling departure in the social theory of the Self.

Erving Goffman, in his short but pungent 1963 book, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, broke identity down into three analytic elements: social, personal, and ego identities. When he wrote in 1963 these categories were of course already familiar at least since William James in 1892. Yet, Goffman, a Canadian whose career was pursued in major American universities, upset the American pragmatist applecart; and this in spite of the fact that he was trained at the University of Chicago in the 1950s where George Herbert Mead earlier had held forth and where, in Goffman’s student days, a good deal of modern Symbolic Interactionism was encouraged. Just the same, Goffman belonged to no school but his own. His was a line of severe skepticism (even at points dismissal) of the, by then, centuries-long history of a search for a coherent theory of the thinking subject or, as it came to be, Self theory; hence, also of identity as primarily a property of the interior Self.

By contrast to nearly everything written before him, Goffman argued, and persuasively so, that identity is a public performance with almost no interior affect. Ego identity, he argued, was not at all Mead’s “I,” nor even Freud’s “ego,” but simply an individual’s *feeling* about his identity situation and not the traditional interior ego or I that possesses and gives life a self: “Self is, as must be, a resident alien, a voice of the group that speaks for and through him” (1963: 123). *Stigma*, as the key word suggests, is a book not about normal identities. It concerns individuals whose identity had been spoiled, causing such an individual to be stigmatized by others in the social around; hence, put at risk by the normals. From this perspective, for Goffman, the two primary identities were social and personal. The former is the public identity that the individual performs well enough such that others around him are brought into the drama in which he stars as a individual of his own making – a hero, a poet, and good person, so forth. Underneath, at the margins (not the deep interior) of the personal life lies a series of personal identity markers of many kinds – a police or prison record, a history of plagiarism, evidence of criminal or other kinds of deviant behavior, a hidden ethnicity or political affiliation, and so forth. Goffman went further to include bodily marks (like warts or tattoos), medical or dental histories, fingerprints, or in our time DNA – any mark, or trace, that is unique to the individual person. Thus personal identity, he said, is information and not information one would want known by others. To the point of his book’s subject, some personal information, if known to others, would spoil the individual’s performed social identity, thereby discrediting the individual (or, as he said in an earlier essay, causing him to lose face). The discrediting is due to the inadvertent release or discovery of a personal identity marker that spoils the act. It may be so normal a discovery as a lover smelling the scent of another lover on the body or, even, the accident of leaving out a box of not so old papers or legal documents where a friend could come across evidence of the individual’s prison record or some other behaviors thought to be deviant. Goffman’s *Stigma* was a completely systematic theory in that it ended up dismissing altogether the concept of ego-identity as no more than a feeling. How the individual feels about his personal identity and its deviations from the social face or the identity he has managed to put over on others. If, for example, that feeling is guilt, this could cause the individual to slip in the control of his personal information, causing him to be discredited.

Thus, and finally, for Goffman, identity was mostly a struggle for information control between the facts of an individual’s biography and the social face he has managed to build up – a face, or identity, that Goffman argued was always at odds with some or another, deep or strategic, secret that must not ever, or ought not at a given moment, be revealed without disastrous
results. Hence, also, Goffman’s identity theory, in addition to being emphatically social, was a more or less universal theory of all identities. So-called normals are no different in the methods they use to manage their social identities. Thus when, at the end of *Stigma*, Goffman wrote of normal deviancy as the foremost characteristic of all social selves, he was defining his politics of identity as interactional politics of controlling one’s social identity which is always at risk of being discredited, however slightly or severely. The methods used to this universal human end, Goffman said, are exactly the same for normals as for deviants – hence: normal deviancy.

It would not be too far wrong to say that Goffman’s identity theory bears some parallels to Freud’s in that both argued that an individual cannot avoid a struggle to maintain a sense of social and personal balance. For Freud that struggle was entirely on the interior; for Goffman it was so to speak on the skin of the self where personal secrets were at risk of destroying a well-made social identity. And both, in effect, argued that, to use our word, whatever identity amounts to, it is never simply wise, good, or true. There are always hidden, destructive forces that can ruin the whole thing. One might say therefore that the only difference between the normal individual and the mental patient or the prostitute is that the latter types do their identity work in public and thus have revealed many of the very same facts or feelings that the legendary good man or the idealized loving wife may experience in their inner most beings.

Still, though Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, among other writings made more or less overt references to the external social histories of his day (and before); Goffman never did. In fact, the absence of a politics beyond identity-politics is a common criticism of him. At the same time, there are reasons to say that Goffman (his silence on the matter notwithstanding) was a product of his times. For one, it is important to note that his first major work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), was the foundational work of a theory of self production as a social drama, thus of impression management. This book first appear in early form in 1956 in Scotland, just when Riesman, Erikson, and other more popular writers were already deeply engaged with the emergence of a conformist or other-directed individualism especially in middle-class American culture in the 1950s. It, therefore, would be hard to conclude that Goffman’s thinking was out of a historical vacuum. Plato’s ideas on wisdom and knowledge were shaped by the culture of Athens. Augustine’s early identity theory seems to have been shaped by the fall of Rome. James and Weber, as well as Simmel, wrote in the period of the rise of the modern industrial order, and so on through the developments in the twentieth century. Goffman too was influenced by his times and, as those times came to be, it became more or more clear that in some strange way Goffman also in weird but evident ways was an original social theorist of many of the changes that took place in the 1960s. That he did not note them, does not mean he did not notice them.

Identity-politics were shaped by global forces that came to a head late in the 1960s. Of these, none was more important than a global movement that began late in the 1940s with the liberation of India from the British (1947), after which, in rapid-fire succession, once colonized peoples in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, others in every corner of the southern tier of the world, began their own decolonization struggles. Some succeeded in due course (China, Vietnam, most of the Caribbean nations, north Africa, Cuba), others (mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, but also Haiti, Cuba in another sense, and parts of South Asia) struggled to form independent nation states relatively free of the older colonial powers. Whether they were successful or not, this global movement clearly affected the world order. In the background of a less centralized world system stood a still powerful Western dominance of global affairs. The West (notably the US in the 1950s and 1960s) remained in the core position, but (and especially due to the effects of the Cold War after 1946) its power was far less than absolute. When some, today, talk of the world as post-modern and mean by that fragmented, they are at least referring to the shattering of the
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Euro-American hegemony over the cultures and affairs of the world’s regions. Perhaps the most famous declaration of this connection was a statement made in 1966 by Jacques Derrida when he referred in “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” to “something has occurred in the history of the concept structure that could be called an ‘event’” (1978 [1966], 278). Derrida was of course referring to an event in culture but, in the late 1960s when he wrote, and in France especially, there could hardly have been any question that in the back of his mind was the decolonizing, hence fragmenting, of the world itself. Derrida surely felt this as a native of Algeria which had won its independence from France in 1962. Thus entered the language of the decentering of culture and social thought – the post-structuralist critique of overly strong structural theories – and also the emergence of the idea that thought, culture, like the world itself, were (and ought to be) increasingly decentered. The central organizing powers may remain in force even when their cultural authority is broken.

At the interior of those core or central powers, in their major cultural centers, world-wide – Paris, Berlin, Birmingham and the rest of the American South, Berkeley and Chicago, and many others – there were strikes, rebellions, resistances against the status quo, which as it turned out was a global as well as a national status quo. Hence, there were new worker movements, to be sure, but more strikingly there came into play what we now recognize as New Social Movements – Blacks in the American South and Northern cities, women worldwide, Latinos and other ethnic groups around the world, gays and lesbians, and many others among those in social groups that had been treated as “minorities” which in practical effect meant outsiders, inferiors. These were called New Social Movements because as Immanuel Wallerstein among many others has said (Wallerstein 2004: 83–6, et passim), until then, struggles for freedom and recognition were of two types (2004: 67–73) – national liberation movements (as in Cuba and India) or working-class revolutions or revolts of “the people”, real and theoretical (as in Russia and differently China and the NLF in Vietnam). The line between the two was not always clear but they had in common the traditional assumption that freedoms were gained in and against prevailing nation-states – one’s own, or the local colonial powers. Wallerstein stood virtually alone in noting that these traditional movements were harbingers of today’s anti-systemic movements, that is, movements against the dominant global forces of the world-system. He thus called 1968 a world revolution. Still, however one describes the political turmoil in the centuries leading up to global 1960s, what the more traditional movements, including decolonization, led to, in due course, was a series of mixed results. The national independence movements were either slow to settle into progress (India) or vulnerable to corrupt dictators put in power by the interests of the powerful nations (Congo, Uganda). On the other hand, the worker revolutions of earlier in the twentieth century themselves were never truly international. Where they attained power, as in Russia, they failed, as again Immanuel Wallerstein in particular puts it, in state formation – in, that is, putting the revolutionary principles into workable political and social institutions. Hence, the important difference between the New Social Movements (NSM) and traditional social movements. The NSM do not primarily aim for a complete upheaval in the state or class structures of a given society. What, on the other hand, they are inclined to do is base political action not only on local or regional concerns of the group acting but also to envision in the long run globally effective new social movements. Thus, in particular the American Civil Rights Movement eventually transformed itself into a fusion of, often, Islamic ideas or, more traditionally, as a vital part of the Pan-African movement that had long been a factor in the world-wide African Diaspora; likewise, nation-based women’s movements took different forms in, say, the US and France or the UK, but in time they increasingly saw themselves as part of a global movement for women’s rights.
These political developments that came to the fore in the 1960s, notably in and after 1968, thus had a telling effect on the Identity concept. They were, historically, the basis for identity-politics of a kind much more overtly political than Goffman’s but also, importantly, identity-politics arising from the New Social Movements were arguably more openly social and political. Within these changes rooted late in 1940s and coming to full force in the 1980s, the Identity concept thus came to a breaking point and, as we will see, a break that called into question the very nature of radical politics and, more generally, of the nation-state as the primary social location of what social identification an individual might have.

From one point of view the most terrifying evidence that the nation-states, even the strongest, after decolonizing and the world revolution of 1968 were loosing their ability to manage their national identities occurred in more recent times (especially after 1989–91) with the worldwide outbreak in ethnic hostilities in states and regions once controlled by great powers. Examples are everywhere – neither the US nor the EU know exactly what to do with ethnic worker populations (Chicanos in the US, Muslims most currently in Europe); China, even as it uses force, has long been beset by the resistance of ethnic regions (such as Tibet and the Turkic populations in West); in the former Soviet Union ethnic violence has been continuous (for example in 2010 in Kyrgyzstan between Uzbeks in the south and the Kyrgyz in the north; in the Balkans and Palestine, Rwanda and Congo, Shi’a and Sunni struggles in the Islamic Diaspora (notably in Iraq) – virtually everywhere). These conflicts within and on the margin of once-stable (if ruthlessly so) states have a long history that, it turned out, were not suppressed at all by long periods of colonial administration and ill-conceived new national forms such as the Soviet Union. Ethnic renewal and its concomitant resistance movements can clearly be said to be one of the more salient if tragic forms of identity-politics in the current period. In all of these cases, and others, national identities faded (if ever they were primary) in favor of hitherto subterranean ethnic loyalties. Here identity-politics approaches the maximum point of pure social definition. Individuals who collectively suffered the strife and slaughter of ethnic violence hardly mattered at all. Whether or not modern democratic values had made themselves felt in the regions or the revivals of ethnic pride for a strong sense of individual rights (as very few did, and nearly none in the modern sense of the ideal of individualism), the deeper story is of a tragic element in this sad story of identity-politics.

Yet, from another point of view, these events took quite a while to formulate their contributions to identity studies and theories. It was well into the late 1970s and 1980s before post-colonial studies (and ethnic studies) came to the fore in universities. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) was an early contribution even though the identity question there was implicit. Some argue that Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) is the *locus classicus* of postcolonial identity theory. From another angle (and one not always clear) there was some very good and interesting work on social and political identification in the emergence later in the 1980s and in the 1990s of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism, still a term in use, was mostly an ideal that by the second decade of the 2000s had been largely abandoned. Just the same, the enduring effect of multicultural theory was that it, as both a theory and a social movement, brought into the public and intellectual spheres the irrefutably of two fundamental historical changes: first, that identities are socially formed and, second, that social identities from one group to another are different, perhaps irreparably so.

In public politics these desiderata of multiculturalism entailed a recognition (still denied by conservative thinkers) that the liberal ideal of assimilation needed to be rethought. Assimilationist politics had its apparently most dramatic success in the American “melting pot” of immigrant workers from Europe. Many we now know had their European names arbitrarily Americanized as they disembarked at Ellis Island. Many of the European workers did in fact over many
generations become “American” and give up for the most part many of their traditions that were not reinforced by strict religious affiliations. Second and third generation Latinos and Koreans often do not speak the languages of their parents and grandparents, just as Italians and Germans had given up their ancestral languages and habits in favor of American ones. But, even though America and Europe remain today important destinations for people seeking economic opportunity and Western educations, many others from South Asia, China, Haiti and others continue to live in immigrant enclaves or practice Westernized forms of the native cultures. Multiculturalism, as a theory and a practice, essentially affirmed these differences (even when the enclaves remained for economic as opposed to cultural reasons). Multiculturalism has, for the most part, become a fact of life throughout North America and the EU, if not China or Russia. That fact has obvious implications for the options available now for identity formation, options that may entail personal choices with profound implications for an individual’s sense of self-identity, but options made possible by a sometimes welcome and other times begrudging recognition that multicultural reality is here to stay, which is in effect to grant that social differences among identities are real, if not immutable.

Yet, these historical events notwithstanding, identity-politics took shape largely in the more rarefied climate of academic and occasionally public intellectual debate. Though there are many instances (of which lately the importance of Queer Theory) no NSM was more important to the reshaping of identity-politics than feminism. Why this is so is a topic for another time, but at the least we can say it had a great deal to do with the fact that second-wave feminists in the 1970s, following in the tradition of women who had participated in the student and civil rights movements of the 1960s, entered public life and academic work in increasing numbers. Many of them brought with them, or looked closely at, the stories of other women’s experiences in mass social movements such as Civil Rights in the US and student revolts in Germany and France. At the first, again in the 1970s, political feminism borrowed mostly from pre-existing political ideas. Of them, the most appealing (and in the US freshly understood) was a vaguely Marxist or, better, Socialist Feminism. Here, and I put this crudely, as in: if in socialism the working class is the universal revolutionary class, then a socialist women’s liberation movement is a movement of the same kind – gender first, then class. If the working class suffered false consciousness that could only be relieved by political and economic crisis, so for women the crises of the 1960s were the provocations for rethinking not just women’s role in relation to men and to society (often called consciousness raising) but also of the deeper nature of Woman’s identity as conceived independently of the traditional sex roles theories that assigned to women the role of moral leader of the household and, among the bourgeois and white classes, keepers of the personal domestic needs of the husband.

From this arose, in an attempt to fashion a serious (my phrase) feminist Identity concept, a number of important writings in the 1970s. Many of these drew on traditional sources such as Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), but for the most part they were formulated against or drawn from classic sources familiar to academic writers. The first of these positions to emerge was feminist standpoint theory which sought to outline and detail the distinctive aspects of, as one of the standpoint theorists put it, the distinctive experience of women that could be acquired from women’s practical experience for a distinctively feminist theory of knowledge and power. As Sandra Harding (1990: 99) so aptly put it, standpoint theory is directed at the “essentialism androcentrism assigns to women.” In the background is Beauvoir’s idea that androcentrism (a term coined by the Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the 1890s) defines Woman as the Other to man, as exactly the second sex. Thus standpoint theorists such as Dorothy Smith (1974 [1990]), borrowing from Marx and ethnomethodology, analyzed the distinctive features of the woman’s standpoint as a site for the renewal of social research and knowledge
– this because the woman’s experience is (for better or worse) rooted in practical interests of daily life to a far greater extent than men’s experience which, in the 1970s especially, was based on their working in the relations of ruling in government and corporate life where objective, official knowledge was primary. The writings of Smith and other standpoint feminists such as Nancy Hartsock (1983) were met in the academy initially by male disdain and suspicion. But among feminists they were powerful, and no more so than in setting feminist identity in lived experience and thus as not a naturalistic sex role but a historical formed and transmutable way of identifying the feminist identity as both different and distinct from the prevailing ideas of gender assimilation and the gender caste system. As such, standpoint feminism was a basis for rethinking the nature and role of women in social life. It was not, to be sure, an explicit identity theory in the traditional sense, but it did deeply challenge the old identity theories many of which were accepted as given in nature even by women, even those earlier first- and second-wave feminists who argued for a women’s equality to men, thus the right to vote, and the protection of gender-based rights. Standpoint feminism, it could be said, put the final nail in the coffin of the European gentleman – the man of learning and elite-class values who was culturally thought to represent the universal humanist identity to which all ought to aspire.

But the standpoint feminist position did not hold the ground it captured in the 1970s. It was quickly met, especially between 1980 and 1990, by a series of challenges from feminists whose experiences diverged from those the standpoint theorists seemed (even when they did not) to have had in mind. Early in the 1980s the standpoint position was often attacked as a strategic essentialism – that standpoint feminism was proposing the woman’s standpoint as not just different but perhaps superior to that of the Universal Man of Liberal culture. Dorothy Smith protested reasonably to the criticism. Still, the claim was fair enough because any strong standpoint position sets up at least an implicit essentialism that allowed for the extension that Woman was One – that all women have the same experiences. One of the most robust criticisms of this kind cane from Audre Lorde’s famous 1979 paper (first a speech to a convention of white feminists) – “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”) in which she rebukes the white feminists gathered at a New York University conference for their, at the time, ignorance of the sharp differences among women, and therefore among feminisms. Lorde was a poet, but also Black and a lesbian. Her challenge, in the last lines of the paper, was telling: “I urge each one of us to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch the terror and loathing of any difference that lives there”– a foretelling of the principle that an identity-politics of sharp differences were in the outside world to be sure but also on the inside. Many others took up the same criticism of what some considered standpoint feminism’s essentialism.

In effect the lesson learned from standpoint feminism and its detractors is that once identity ceases to be a universal attribute of total human experience like that of women (but in principle others as well), then the very fact of differences erodes any possibility of even an historically conditioned identity as pure and simply feminine, Black, queer, or whatever. Identity differences alter identity theory in ways that cannot be retrieved.

In the mid-1980s a quite puzzling and eventually highly influential paper began to circulate widely in the academy. Donna Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs ”(1985) put forward the figure of the cyborg as a form arising from the interpenetration of natural and technological elements in the formation; in effect, of human identity in the late modern world. Today, when individuals are attached to cell phones, heart monitors, hearing aids, implanted medical devices, and the like, the idea is less shocking than it was in the mid-1980s. As confusing as this theme was, what was stunningly clear, but still upsetting to many readers, was Haraway’s affirmative statement that “identities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic” (1991 [1985]: 154); hence, the expression she made famous (though she borrowed the idea from others) is that identities
are, at least for those in the excluded and marginal subject positions, always “fractured identities.” Yet, though the term came to be used for a more general identity theory, Haraway’s fractured identities referred to the necessary reality of the experience of excluded women who could be, endlessly, women, yes, but also lesbian, Latina, poor, just to name the more obvious fractures that cut through the identity experiences of many women for whom the “consciousness of exclusion is acute” (1991 [1985]: 154). The *locus classicus* of a fully articulated fractured identity is Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) in which she writes poetically of her shared identities with Chicana lesbians who speak English, Mexican, and their indigenous languages and who work hard in the American southwest on the economic margins of a wealthy nation, yet are cut-off from their homelands. They cannot go home. They live on a border – both the real one between the US and Mexico (always, especially today, contested) and the interior borders within that mark the fractures she must live with (and in) these multiple identities and live always contradictorily, partially, and strategically when facing the exterior world.

The differences between standpoint and fractured identity feminisms are real, but they also, in a sense lead one to the other. Once, feminist identity is understood to be different from a universalizing cultural norm, then it is virtually impossible not to come soon enough to the final implication that if Woman (or in principle any other social category of similar social experience) is different, then her differences are exposed to obvious fractures with which, truth be told, women, more than men (as a rule), must contend – whether as the good wife who experiences the condescensions to which her status exposes her or, let us say, the Black or Latina domestic who cleans and cares for the homemaker yet who must return to her separate life where she cares for her own home, her own children, and her own racial, ethnic, and other differences.

It is impossible here to trace all the ways identity-politics in the 1980s played out in other areas besides feminisms. Postcolonial theory is one. To a lesser extent race theory has been another. And Queer theory was, by the 1990s, an especially important one that here must be discussed, however briefly.

In 1990, two modern-classic works in the identity-politics debate were published. One was Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990). Though Collins, at several points, presented her work as an Black feminist standpoint theory, in fact the book is a wide-ranging historical and analytic presentation of the multiple identities Black women in America must contend with. Yet, like Anna Julia Cooper in the 1890s, Collins interpreted these fractured experiences as a political and moral strength, which led her to adopt a concept (originally coined by bell hooks) that lent important subtlety to the fractured identity position – the matrix of domination. In effect, she said that domination in society is never a unidirectional force from the top down on the oppressed classes. Rather power in society works as a series of vectors moving in several directions down and even in principle up to affect any given individual or group of individuals in multiple ways. The matrix thus affects Black women in their several identities by, so to speak, the privilege of their knowledge of the structure of the social array by virtue of being at or near the lower end of the field of vectors of oppression. Hence, the startling, but true statement: “No two biographies are the same” (1990: 227). She did not intend to atomize individuals from one and other, but instead to explain that the experiences of oppressions – many shared, however partially, by Black women (also Women of Color globally) – created both the knowledge and power necessary for resistance to the dominant powers. Collins was, thus, the first to offer a robust, structural theory, historically grounded, of the complexities of national (and by extension) global dominations as they affect the near universal fracturing of identities, hence the politics of identity (or we must now say identities).
Also in 1990, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* appeared. This one book brought to the fore insights that had been implicit to the beginnings of the fractured identities tradition but also in the, by then, emerging queer theory line of thought. As the subtitle suggests here, Butler begins to call into question the very concept of identity or, at least, of identity being able to refer to an analytically stable concept such as gender in the case of feminism, or sexuality in the case of queer theory, or, by implication, race, class, postcolonial status. In Butler’s words:

The task of this work is to center on – or to decenter – such defining institutions [as] phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality. . . . Precisely because “female” no longer appears to be a stable notion, its meaning is as troubled and unfixed as “woman” . . . It is no longer clear that feminist theory ought to try to settle the questions of primary identity in order to get on with the tasks of politics. Instead, we ought to ask, what political possibilities are the consequence of a radical critique of the categories of identity?

(Butler 1990: ix)

From this programmatic statement came a book that, as its primary title suggests, served to trouble not only the Identity concept but also just as much gender itself and by implication any such unstable category. Yet, in this statement and subsequent writings, Butler is clear that in some sense gender is, if not the most troubling of concepts, at least the one that, as it had been opened up to inspection in the two preceding decades, led in due course to the questions she poses of identity. Why? Butler’s answer was the answer that had been anticipated in a goodly number of queer (or if one prefers gay and lesbian) theory. Gender is a term that replaced an abstract concept sex – as in the nineteenth-century locution, the female sex. What is apparent, or was by the 1990s certainly, is that sex is not an abstract social category but a very particular, even juicy, bodily experience. Woman is not a sex, but she has sex, or desires to have it, and the sex she has or seeks may be with men or with women, or with both, or, for that matter, she may wish, or choose to become, a he, and vice versa. Butler’s most pungent expression is that all sex is a kind of necessary drag. Gays and lesbians are not imitating heterosexual roles anymore than heterosexuals are enacting naturalistic categories. If, we could say, gender identity is not a category defined by natural sex roles, then certainly sex itself is not. Crudely put, Butler’s book inspired a subsequent line of thought that argued that gender like sex is performed and if this is so, then all socially available categories are not so much constructed (for good or ill) but performed. Butler’s idea of performativity is one with a separate and philosophically sophisticated history, so it would not be accurate, strictly speaking, to compare it to Goffman’s performed self or face. Yet, we are reminded that what began in the 1960s, when Goffman however unwittingly invented the ideal of identity-politics, grew decade by decade to call into question the concept of identity.

The long history of the Identity concept from its thin intimations in Plato, through the Greeks and then Augustine, the Protestants and the early modern philosophy of self-consciousness, to Freud and Simmel, then through the 1950s in Europe and America, followed a very clear path. Identity, as we use it, required something like a modern world in which it was necessary (or at least philosophically possible) to think of a self as, in Descartes’s principle, the thinking I that in reflection finds itself thinking thereby existing, then the ego of modern future oriented capitalism, to in the twentieth century after 1920 an enormous wall of social crises that led from Adorno to Riesman to Giddens on the one hand and from Beauvoir to standpoint feminists, to fractured identity theorists and to Butler and queer theorists of identity as performed on the other. Whether or not the Identity concept has out lived its usefulness, remains to be seen.
Future developments

Whether, in the twenty-first century, the Identity concept is to remake itself depends to a considerable extent on which identity theorists and more empirical students of the subject study it with respect to the dramatically altered social and historical circumstances of our time. Some would all too simply call this the post-9/11 realities. Others would call it (all too simply) the world of globalizations. Fewer perhaps, but some just the same, would call it a migratory world in which extreme poverty and social exclusions define the global realities as much as does the speed of information transfers.

Whatever, in our day, the Identity concept will become, it will have to abandon, or so I suppose, some of the tried-and-true verities of its history. If, for one example, one grants Haraway’s fractured identities, then the ideal of strong interior Self is severely crippled. If, for an earlier example, one grants that, among the more affluent of the world, Riesman’s inner-directed Self has become consumption- or other-directed, then, as the history has shown, it is necessary to make identity at least as much a social, as a psychological, attribute. But if, as many thoughtful conservatives argue, multiculturalism leads to the loss of individualism, then what is to become of the nation – of the social collective of whichever scale, and thus of politics in the sense of democracies of whichever kind? And if, to end a list that could go on endlessly, there is anything to the fact that the world is global in the sense that everyone, rich or poor, is exposed to necessity of travel or migration, to seeking refuge or appropriating marginal urban spaces as they gather on the edges of today’s growing, southern tier mega metropolises, then what becomes of the state or the city or even the town as a territorial zone of security and citizenship, and thus of the protection of individuals from the ravages of the global fluctuations – whether economic deprivation or war or other insidious forms of violence?

At the very least, students of the Identity concept must respect the history of concept which has never for very long been a stable analytic category. Recalling William James’s principle of a pure ego we must indeed have some way to know that we are the same today as we were yesterday. It is far from clear that waking up in globally standard furnished room in the local Hyatt hotel in Bishkek or the same refugee camp in Chad or on the same subway grate in any big city is a sufficient social basis for self-recognition. Never before in modern times has it been more true that A = A cannot yield a singular from day to day. These, to be sure, are the absurd extremes of the social forms of identity, but they are the realities of the present situation which, by all measures, is more violent, less secure, more mobile, less human than the inventors of modern cultural values in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries could have ever supposed. These realities are, even far worse than my parents who lived through the Depression and two world wars could have imagined. Yet, identity theory has always had to come to terms with social realities, even in the days when the bourgeois gentleman thought himself above all that. This is the actually quite sturdy historical resource upon which the study of the Identity concept can drawn for clues as to what to make of it in the future.

It is entirely possible that, beyond the troubles of fracturing identities, the ironic benefit will be a greater clarity of the elementary fact that in order to be an individual one has no choice but to act as if she were, say, not one but several beings at once. To try to be a pure ego is try to become an A that always equals itself – a true impossibility; hence, the Zero Signifier of self-identification is, for all intents and purposes, a deadly state of self affairs. Death may well be the final zero of all meanings of this kind, but in the short run to live as though one’s interior and exterior circumstances are always at risk is to live life as it is. All grass withers; all life dies. But during the course of the days it may live, it must live in daytime and night, through sun and rain, and all the rest. It is not by accident that Donna Haraway’s essay on fractured identities begins...
with a cyborg figure that affirms not just the border humans share with their own technologies but with their natural – which is to say, animal – beings. In one sense, the modern theory of identity was founded, however cryptically, on the strong theory that the human being is somehow special, superior to the rest of nature and this may be why it has been so deadly – always, as time went by, trying to cleanse the house of impure animals who are in fact our ancestors in the biological scheme of things.

If, in the course of our time we living beings may have, we let Life become the Zero Signifier instead of the death that is to come, then we, so to speak, can be One in a sense that reaches deep below the surface differences to find the common ground all creatures depend on to be, to live. That ground is not, nor could it ever have been, a pure ego or Self; but it does nurture a strong moral and practical ability to be a one among the many in the sisterhood of traveling life. Such a one – however odd it may seem to moderns who desire a pure identity – is not by any means morbid, nor is it foolish. When you stop to think of it the modern ideals of the pure ego were always, however loosely, mixed up with political programs to purify the race of lesser beings in a holocaust of vain social arrogance. We humanoids have nearly killed the air and waters. We have spoiled the good earth, as we have killed each other. War is indeed politics by another means, but we must consider what politics are if they have not been what Achille Mbembe has so aptly called necropolitics.

However you slice it, to live with a sense of ourselves comes down in the end to two possibilities. To live life as it comes to us, often dirty and always several or more; or to die prematurely. If the history of the last several centuries means anything at all, it is that as humans have sought a pure identity under the shelter of an ideology of human specialness, they (which is to say we) have lived all too violently with death in our hearts. If we slaughter the animals we eat without regard for our relation to them, then how much easier it would be to kill or maim our human neighbors. That is the truth of history. Identity theory must deal with it.

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