

Beyond "Identity"
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"The worst thing one can do with words", wrote George Orwell a half a century ago, "is to surrender to them." If language is to be "an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought," he continued, one must "let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about."¹ The argument of this paper is that the social sciences and humanities have surrendered to the word "identity"; that this has both intellectual and political costs; and that we can do better. "Identity," we will argue, tends to mean too much (when understood in a strong sense), too little (when understood in a weak sense), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity). We take stock of the conceptual and theoretical work "identity" is supposed to do, and suggest that this work might be done by other terms, less ambiguous, and unencumbered by the reifying connotations of "identity."

We argue that the prevailing constructivist stance on identity - the attempt to "soften" the term, to acquit it of the charge of "essentialism" by stipulating that identities are constructed, fluid, and multiple - leaves us without a rationale for talking about "identities" at all and ill-equipped to examine the "hard" dynamics and essentialist claims of contemporary identity politics. "Soft" constructivism allows putative "identities" to proliferate. But as they proliferate, the term loses its analytical purchase. If identity is everywhere, it is nowhere. If it is fluid, how can we understand the ways in which self-understandings may harden, congeal, and crystallize? If it is constructed, how can we understand the sometimes coercive force of external

¹ From "Politics and the English Language," in George Orwell, *A Collection of Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1954), pp. 169-170.

identifications? If it is multiple, how do we understand the terrible singularity that is often striven for - and sometimes realized - by politicians seeking to transform mere categories into unitary and exclusive groups? How can we understand the power and pathos of identity politics?

"Identity" is a key term in the vernacular idiom of contemporary politics, and social analysis must take account of this fact. But this does not require us to use "identity" as a category of analysis or to conceptualize "identities" as something that all people have, seek, construct, and negotiate. Conceptualizing all affinities and affiliations, all forms of belonging, all experiences of commonality, connectedness, and cohesion, all self-understandings and self-identifications in the idiom of "identity" saddles us with a blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary.

We do not aim here to contribute to the ongoing debate on identity politics.² We focus instead on identity as an analytical category. This is not a "merely semantic" or terminological issue. The use and abuse of "identity," we suggest, affects not only the language of social analysis but also - inseparably - its substance. Social analysis - including the analysis of identity politics - requires relatively unambiguous analytical categories. Whatever its suggestiveness, whatever its indispensability in certain practical contexts, "identity" is too ambiguous, too torn between "hard" and "soft" meanings, essentialist connotations and constructivist qualifiers, to serve well the demands of social analysis.

² For a tempered critique of identity politics, see Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), and for a sophisticated defense, Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon, 1997). For a suggestion that the high noon of identity politics may have passed, see Ross Posnock, "Before and After Identity Politics," *Raritan 15* (Summer 1995):95-115; and David A. Hollinger, "Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and the United States," in Noah Pickus, ed., *Immigration and Citizenship in the Twenty-first Century*

The "identity" crisis in the social sciences

"Identity" and cognate terms in other languages have a long history as technical terms in Western philosophy, from the ancient Greeks through contemporary analytical philosophy. They have been used to address the perennial philosophical problems of permanence amidst manifest change, and of unity amidst manifest diversity.³ Widespread vernacular and social-analytical use of "identity" and its cognates, however, is of much more recent vintage and more localized provenance.

The introduction of "identity" into social analysis and its initial diffusion in the social sciences and public discourse occurred in the United States in the 1960s (with some anticipations in the second half of the 1950s).⁴ The most important and best-known trajectory involved the appropriation and popularization of the work of Erik Erikson (who was responsible, among other

(Rowman Littlefield, 1998).

³ Avrum Stroll, "Identity," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: MacMillan, 1967), vol. IV, p. 121. For a contemporary philosophical treatment, see Bartholomaeus Boehm, *Identität und Identifikation: Zur Persistenz physikalischer Gegenstände* (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 1989). On the history and vicissitudes of "identity" and cognate terms, see W. J. M. Mackenzie, *Political Identity* (New York: St. Martin's, 1978), pp. 19-27, and John D. Ely, "Community and the Politics of Identity: Toward the Genealogy of a Nation-State Concept," *Stanford Humanities Review* 5, no. 2 (1997), pp. 76ff.

⁴ See Philip Gleason, "Identifying Identity: a Semantic History," *Journal of American History* 69, no. 4 (March 1983):910-931. The 1930s *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan: 1930-1935) contains no entry on identity, but it does have one on "identification" – largely focused on fingerprinting and other modes of judicial marking of individuals (Thorstein Sellin, Vol. 7, pp. 573-75). The 1968 *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan), contains an article on "identification, political" by William Buchanan (Vol. 7, pp. 57-61), which focuses on a "person's identification with a group" – including class, party, religion – and another on "identity, psychosocial," by Erik Erikson (*ibid.*, 61-65), which focuses on the individual's "role integration in his group."

things, for coining the term "identity crisis").⁵ But as Philip Gleason has shown,⁶ there were other paths of diffusion as well. The notion of identification was pried from its original, specifically psychoanalytic context (where the term had been initially introduced by Freud) and linked to ethnicity on the one hand (through Gordon Allport's influential 1954 book *The Nature of Prejudice*) and to sociological role theory and reference group theory on the other (through figures such as Nelson Foote and Robert Merton). Symbolic interactionist sociology, concerned from the outset with "the self," came increasingly to speak of "identity," in part through the influence of Anselm Strauss.⁷ More influential in popularizing the notion of identity, however, were Erving Goffman, working on the periphery of the symbolic interactionist tradition, and Peter Berger, working in social constructionist and phenomenological traditions.⁸

For a variety of reasons, the term identity proved highly resonant in the 1960s,⁹ diffusing quickly across disciplinary and national boundaries, establishing itself in the journalistic as well as the academic lexicon, and permeating the language of social and political practice as well as

⁵ "Gleason, "Identifying Identity," pp. 914ff; for the appropriation of Erikson's work in political science, see Mackenzie, *Political Identity*.

⁶ Gleason, "Identifying Identity," pp. 915-918.

⁷ Anselm Strauss, *Mirrors and masks: the search for an identity*. Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1959.

⁸ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963); Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966); Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (1973); Peter Berger, "Modern Identity: Crisis and Continuity," in *The Cultural Drama: Modern Identities and Social Ferment*, ed. Wilton S. Dillon (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1974).

⁹ As Philip Gleason has pointed out, the popularization of the term began well before the turbulence of the mid- and late 1960s. Gleason attributes this initial popularization to the midcentury prestige and cognitive authority of the social sciences, the wartime and postwar vogue of national character studies, and the postwar critique of mass society, which newly

that of social and political analysis. In the American context, the prevalent individualist ethos and idiom gave a particular salience and resonance to "identity" concerns, particularly in the contexts of the 1950s thematization of the "mass society" problem and the 1960s generational rebellions. And from the late 1960s on, with the rise of the Black Power movement, and subsequently other ethnic movements for which it served as a template, concerns with and assertions of individual identity, already linked by Erikson to "communal culture,"¹⁰ were readily, if facilely, transposed to the group level. The proliferation of identitarian claim-making was facilitated by the comparative institutional weakness of leftist politics in the United States and by the concomitant weakness of class-based idioms of social and political analysis. As numerous analysts have observed, class can itself be understood as an identity.¹¹ Our point here is simply that the weakness of class politics in the U.S. (vis-a-vis Western Europe) left the field particularly wide open for the profusion of identity claims.

Already in the mid-1970s, W. J. M. Mackenzie could characterize identity as a word "driven out of its wits by over-use," and Robert Coles could remark that the notions of identity and identity crisis had become "the purest of cliches."¹² But that was only the beginning. In the

problematized the "relationship of the individual to society" ("Identifying Identity," pp. 922ff).

¹⁰ Erikson characterized identity as "a process 'located' *in the core of the individual* and yet also *in the core of his communal culture*, a process which establishes . . . the identity of those two identities" (*Identity: Youth and Crisis* [New York: Norton, 1968], p. 22, italics in the original). Although this is a relatively late formulation, the link was already established in Erikson's immediately postwar writings.

¹¹ See for example Craig Calhoun, "New Social Movements of the Nineteenth Century,"

¹² Mackenzie, *Political Identity*, p. 11, reporting a seminar paper of 1974; Coles is quoted in Gleason, "Identifying Identity," p. 913. Gleason notes that the problem was remarked even earlier: "by the late 1960s the terminological situation had gotten completely out of hand" (*ibid.*, p. 915). Erikson himself lamented the "indiscriminate" use of "identity" and "identity crisis" in

1980s, with the rise of race, class, and gender as the "holy trinity" of literary criticism and cultural studies,¹³ the humanities joined the fray in full force. And "identity talk" - inside and outside academia - continues to proliferate today.¹⁴ The "identity" crisis - a crisis of overproduction and consequent devaluation of meaning - shows no sign of abating.¹⁵

Qualitative as well as quantitative indicators signal the centrality - indeed the inescapability - of "identity" as a topos. In recent years, two new interdisciplinary journals

Identity: Youth and Crisis, published in 1968 (p. 16).

¹³ Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Editors' Introduction: Multiplying Identities," in *Identities*, ed. Appiah and Gates (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 1.

¹⁴ Between 1990 and 1997 alone, for example, the number of journal articles in the Current Contents database with "identity" or "identities" in the title more than doubled, while the total number of articles increased by about 20%. James Fearon found a similar increase in the number of dissertation abstracts containing "identity," even after controlling for the increase in the total number of dissertations abstracted. See "What is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?," unpublished manuscript, Dept. of Political Science, Stanford University, p. 1.

¹⁵ One might also speak of a narrower "'identity crisis' crisis." Coined and popularized by Erikson, and applied to social and political collectivities by Lucian Pye and others, the notion of "identity crisis" took off in the 1960s. (For Erikson's own retrospective reflections on the origins and vicissitudes of the expression, see the *Prologue to Identity: Youth and Crisis*, pp. 16ff.) Crises have become (oxymoronically) chronic; and putative crises of identity have proliferated to the point of destroying whatever meaning the concept may once have had. Already in 1968, Erikson could lament that the expression was being used in a "ritualized" fashion (*ibid.*, p. 16). A recent bibliographical sampling revealed that "identity crises" were predicated not only of the usual suspects -- above all ethnic, racial, national, gender, and sexual identities -- but also of such heterogeneous subjects as fifth-century Gaul, the forestry profession, histologists, the French medical corps during the First World War, the internet, the Sonowal Kacharis, technical education in India, early childhood special education, French hospital nurses, kindergarten teachers, TV, sociology, Japan's consumer groups, the European Space Agency, Japan's MITI, the National Association of Broadcasting, Cathay Pacific Airways, Presbyterians, the CIA, universities, Clorox, Chevrolet, lawyers, the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, black theology, eighteenth century Scottish literature, and, our favorite, dermopterous fossils.

devoted to the subject, complete with star-studded editorial boards, have been launched.¹⁶ And quite apart from the pervasive concern with "identity" in work on gender, sexuality, race, religion, ethnicity, nationalism, immigration, new social movements, culture and "identity politics", even those whose work has *not* been concerned primarily with these topics have felt obliged to address the question of identity. A selective listing of major social theorists and social scientists whose main work lies *outside* the traditional "homelands" of identity theorizing yet who have nonetheless written explicitly on "identity" in recent years includes Zygmunt Bauman, Pierre Bourdieu, Fernand Braudel, Craig Calhoun, S. N. Eisenstadt, Anthony Giddens, Bernhard Giesen, Jürgen Habermas, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Paul Ricoeur, Amartya Sen, Margaret Somers, Charles Taylor, Charles Tilly, and Harrison White.¹⁷

¹⁶ *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, which appeared in 1994, "explores the relationship of racial, ethnic and national identities and power hierarchies within national and global arenas.... [It] responds to the paradox of our time: the growth of a global economy and transnational movements of populations produce or perpetuate distinctive cultural practices and differentiated identities" (Statement of "aims and scope" printed on inside front cover). *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, whose first issue appeared in 1995, is concerned with "the formations of, and transformations in, socially significant identities, their attendant forms of material exclusion and power, as well as the political and cultural possibilities open[ed] up by these identifications" (statement printed on inside front cover).

¹⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, "Soil, Blood, and Identity," in *Sociological Review* 40 (1992): 675-701; Pierre Bourdieu, "L'identité et la représentation: Éléments pour une réflexion critique sur l'idée de région," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 35 (1980): 63-72; Fernand Braudel, *The Identity of France*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988-1990; Craig Calhoun, "Social Theory and the Politics of Identity," in Calhoun, ed., *Social theory and the politics of identity* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1994); S. N. Eisenstadt and Bernhard Giesen, "The Construction of Collective Identity," *Archives européennes de sociologie* 36, no. 1 (1995): 72102; Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, in association with Blackwell, Oxford, 1991); Jürgen Habermas, *Staatsbürgerschaft und rationale Identität: Überlegungen zur europäischen Zukunft* (St. Gallen: Erker, 1991); Claude Lévi-Strauss, ed., *L'identité* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977); Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Amartya Sen, "Goals, Commitment, and Identity," *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 2 (Fall 1985): 341-355; Margaret Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and

Categories of practice and categories of analysis

Many key terms in the interpretative social sciences and history -- "race," "nation," "ethnicity," "citizenship," "democracy," "class," "community," and "tradition," for example -- are at once categories of social and political *practice* and categories of social and political *analysis*. By "categories of practice," following Bourdieu, we mean something akin to what others have called "native" or "folk" or "lay" categories. These are categories of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors, as distinguished from the experience-distant categories used by social analysts.¹⁸ We prefer the expression "category of practice" to the alternatives, for while the latter imply a relatively sharp distinction between "native" or "folk" or "lay" categories on the one hand and "scientific" categories on the other, such concepts as "race," "ethnicity," or "nation" are marked by close reciprocal connection and mutual influence between their practical and analytical uses.¹⁹

"Identity," too, is both a category of practice and a category of analysis. As a category of

Network Approach," *Theory and Society* 23 (1994):605-649; Charles Taylor, "The politics of recognition", in *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"*; Charles Tilly, "Citizenship, identity and social history," in Tilly, ed., *Citizenship, identity and social history* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Harrison White, *Identity and control: a structural theory of social action* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).

¹⁸ On experience-near and experience-distant concepts -- the terms are derived from Heinz Kohut -- see Clifford Geertz, "From the Native's Point of View," in *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic, 1983), p. 57. The basic contrast goes back at least to Durkheim's *Rules of Sociological Method*, which criticized the sociological use of "pre-notions" or lay concepts that have been "created by experience and for it." Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: Free Press, 1938), chapter 2.

¹⁹ As Loïc Wacquant notes of race, the "continual barter between folk and analytical notions, the uncontrolled conflation of social and sociological understandings of 'race'" is "intrinsic to the category. From its inception, the collective fiction labeled 'race' ... has always mixed science with common sense and traded on the complicity between them" ("For an Analytic of Racial

practice, it is used by "lay" actors in some (not all!) everyday settings to make sense of themselves, of their activities, of what they share with, and how they differ from, others. It is also used by political entrepreneurs to persuade people to understand themselves, their interests, and their predicaments in a certain way, to persuade certain people that they are (for certain purposes) "identical" with one another and at the same time different from others, and to organize and justify collective action along certain lines.²⁰ In these ways the term "identity" is implicated both in everyday life and in "identity politics" in its various forms.

Everyday "identity talk" and "identity politics" are real and important phenomena. But the contemporary salience of "identity" as a category of practice does not require its use as a category of analysis. Consider an analogy. "Nation" is a widely used category of social and political practice. Appeals and claims made in the name of putative "nations" -- for example, claims to self-determination -- have been central to politics for a hundred and fifty years. But one does not have to use "nation" as an analytical category in order to understand and analyze such appeals and claims. One does not have to take a category inherent in the *practice* of nationalism -- the realist, reifying conception of nations as real communities -- and make this category central to the *theory* of nationalism.²¹ Nor does one have to use "race" as a category of analysis -- which risks taking for granted that "race" exists -- in order to understand and analyze social and

Domination," *Political Power and Social Theory* 11, 1997, 222-3).

²⁰ On "ethnic identity entrepreneurs," see Barbara Lal, "Ethnic Identity Entrepreneurs: Their Role in Transracial and Intercountry Adoptions," *Asian Pacific Migration Journal* 6 (1997): 385-413.

²¹ This argument is developed further in Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Chapter 1.

political practices oriented to the presumed existence of putative "races."²² Just as one can analyze "nation-talk" and nationalist politics without positing the existence of "nations," or "race-talk" and "race"-oriented politics without positing the existence of "races," so one can analyze "identity-talk" and identity politics without, as analysts, positing the existence of "identities."

Reification is a social process, not only an intellectual practice. As such, it is central to the politics of "ethnicity," "race," "nation," and other putative "identities." Analysts of this kind of politics should seek to *account* for this process of reification. We should seek to explain the processes and mechanisms through which what has been called the "political fiction" of the "nation" -- or of the "ethnic group," "race", or other putative "identity" -- can crystallize, at certain moments, as a powerful, compelling reality.²³ But we should avoid unintentionally *reproducing* or *reinforcing* such reification by uncritically adopting categories of practice as categories of analysis.

The mere use of a term as a category of practice, to be sure, does not disqualify it as a

²² Mara Loveman, "Is 'race' essential? A comment on Bonilla-Silva, *American Sociological Review*, forthcoming October 1999. See also Wacquant, "For an Analytic of Racial Domination,"; Rupert Taylor, "Racial Terminology and the Question of 'Race' in South Africa" manuscript, p. 7; and Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Vol. I, 385ff., for a strikingly modern argument questioning the analytical utility of the notions of "race," "ethnic group," and "nation."

²³ On "nation" as a "political fiction," see Louis Pinto, "Une fiction politique: la nation," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 64 (September 1986), a Bourdieuan appreciation of the studies of nationalism carried out by the eminent Hungarian historian Jeno Szucs. On race as a "collective fiction," see Wacquant, "For an Analytic of Racial Domination," pp. 222-3. The key work by Bourdieu in this domain is "L'identité et la représentation: éléments pour une réflexion critique sur l'idée de région," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 35 (November 1980), part of which is reprinted in Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard, 1991).

category of analysis.²⁴ If it did, the vocabulary of social analysis would be a great deal poorer, and more artificial, than it is. What is problematic is not *that* a particular term is used, but *how* it is used. The problem, as Loïc Wacquant has argued with respect to "race," lies in the "uncontrolled conflation of social and sociological ... [or] folk and analytic understandings."²⁵ The problem is that "nation," "race," and "identity" are used analytically a good deal of the time more or less as they are used in practice, in an implicitly or explicitly reifying manner, in a manner that implies or asserts that "nations," "races," and "identities" "exist" and that people "have" a "nationality," a "race," an "identity."

It may be objected that this overlooks recent efforts to avoid reifying "identity" by theorizing identities as multiple, fragmented, and fluid.²⁶ "Essentialism" has indeed been vigorously criticized, and constructivist gestures now accompany most discussions of "identity."²⁷ Yet we often find an uneasy amalgam of constructivist language and essentialist argumentation.²⁸ This is not a matter of intellectual sloppiness. Rather, it reflects the dual

²⁴ Even Durkheim's uncompromisingly objectivist sociological manifesto shies away from this extreme position; see *The Rules of Sociological Method*, chapter 2.

²⁵ Wacquant, "For an Analytic of Racial Domination," pp. 222. See also Wacquant's criticism of the concept of "underclass" in "L'underclass urbaine dans l'imaginaire social et scientifique américain," in Serge Paugam, ed., *L'exclusion: l'état des savoirs* (Paris: La découverte, 1996):248-262.

²⁶ For a sustained and influential example, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

²⁷ For a recent review, see Craig Calhoun, "Social Theory and the Politics of Identity," pp. 9-36 in Calhoun, ed., *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

²⁸ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, for example, slides from an impeccably constructivist characterization of "racialized social systems" as "societies . . . partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories" to the claim that such placement "produces definite social relations between the races," where "the races" are characterized as real social groups with differing objective interests

orientation of many academic identitarians as both *analysts* and *protagonists* of identity politics. It reflects the tension between the constructivist language that is required by academic correctness and the foundationalist or essentialist message that is required if appeals to "identity" are to be effective in practice.²⁹ Nor is the solution to be found in a more consistent constructivism: for it is not clear why that which is routinely characterized as "multiple,

("Rethinking Racism Toward a Structural Interpretation," *American Sociological Review* 62 (1996), 469-70). In their influential *Racial Formation in the United States* (2nd ed., New York: Routledge, 1994), Michael Omi and Howard Winant strive to be more consistently constructivist. But they too fail to remain faithful to their constructivist definition of "race" as an "unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle . . . [and as] a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of social bodies" (55). The historical experiences of "white European" immigrants, they argue, were and remain fundamentally different from those of "racial minority groups" (including Latinos and Asian Americans as well as African Americans and Native Americans); the "ethnicity paradigm" is applicable to the former but not - because of its "neglect of race *per se*" - to the latter (14-23). This sharp distinction between "ethnic" and "racial" groups neglects the fact - now well established in the historical literature - that the "whiteness" of several European immigrant groups was "achieved" after an initial period in which they were often categorized in racial or race-like terms as non-white; it also neglects what might be called "de-racialization" processes among some groups they consider fundamentally "racial." On the former, see James R. Barrett and David Roediger, "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the 'New Immigrant' Working Class," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Spring 1997, 3-44; on the latter, see Joel Perlman and Roger Waldinger, "Second Generation Decline? Children of Immigrants, Past and Present - a Reconsideration," *International Migration Review* 31, 4 (Winter 1997), 903ff.

²⁹ Walter Benn Michaels has argued that ostensibly constructivist notions of cultural identity, in so far as they are advanced -- as they often are advanced in practice, especially in connection with race, ethnicity, and nationality -- as reasons for our holding, or valuing, a set of beliefs or practices, cannot avoid essentialist appeals to who we *are*. "There are no anti-essentialist accounts of identity.... [T]he essentialism inheres not in the description of the identity but in the attempt to derive the practices from the identity - we *do* this because we *are* this. Hence anti-essentialism ... must take the form not of producing more sophisticated accounts of identity (that is, more sophisticated essentialisms) but of ceasing to explain what people do or should do by reference to who they are and/or what culture they belong to" ("Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity," in *Identities*, ed. Appiah and Gates, p. 61n). Note, however, the crucial elision at the end of the quoted passage between "do" and "should do." Essentialism inheres, *pace* Michaels, less in the "attempt to derive [in an explanatory mode] the practice from the identity" than in the attempt to *prescribe* the practices on the basis of an *ascribed* identity:

fragmented, and fluid" should be conceptualized as "identity" at all.

The uses of "identity"

What do scholars mean when they talk about "identity"?³⁰ What conceptual and explanatory work is the term supposed to do? This depends on the context of its use and the theoretical tradition from which the use in question derives. The term is richly -- indeed for an analytical concept, hopelessly -- ambiguous. But one can identify a few key uses:

1. Understood as a ground or basis of social or political action, "identity" is often opposed to "interest" in an effort to highlight and conceptualize *non-instrumental* modes of social and political action.³¹ With a slightly different analytical emphasis, it is used to underscore the manner in which action - individual or collective - may be governed by *particularistic self-understandings* rather than by *putatively universal self-interest*.³² This is probably the most general use of the term; it is frequently found in combination with other uses. It involves three related but distinct contrasts in ways of conceptualizing and explaining action. The first is between self-understanding and (narrowly understood) self-interest.³³ The second is

you *ought to do* this because you *are* this.

³⁰ For a different approach to this question, see Fearon, "What is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?"

³¹ See for example Jean L. Cohen, "Strategy or Identity: New Theoretical Paradigms and Contemporary Social Movements," *Social Research* 52, 4 (Winter 1985): 663-716.

³² Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity."

³³ This opposition depends on a narrow conceptualization of the category "interest," one restricted to interests understood to be directly derivable from social structure (see for example *ibid*, 624). If interest is instead understood to be culturally or discursively constituted, to be dependent on the discursive *identification* of interests and (more fundamentally) interest-bearing units, to be "constituted and reconstituted *in time and over time*," like narrative identities in

between particularity and (putative) universality. The third is between two ways of construing social location. Many (though not all) strands of identitarian theorizing see social and political action as powerfully shaped by position in social space.³⁴ In this they agree with many (though not all) strands of universalist, instrumentalist theorizing. But "social location" means something quite different in the two cases. For identitarian theorizing, it means position in a multidimensional space defined by *particularistic categorical attributes* (race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation). For instrumentalist theorizing, it means position in a *universalistically conceived social structure* (for example, position in the market, the occupational structure, or the mode of production).³⁵

2. Understood as a specifically *collective* phenomenon, "identity" denotes a fundamental and consequential "*sameness*" among members of a group or category. This may be understood objectively (as a sameness "in itself") or subjectively (as an experienced, felt, or perceived sameness). This sameness is expected to manifest itself in solidarity, in shared dispositions or consciousness, or in collective action. This usage is found especially in the literature on social movements,³⁶ on gender,³⁷ and on race, ethnicity, and nationalism.³⁸ In this usage, the

Somers' account, then the opposition loses much of its force.

³⁴ Some strands of identitarian theorizing emphasize the relative autonomy of self-understanding vis-à-vis social location. The tendency is most pronounced in the fourth and the fifth uses sketched below.

³⁵ The contemporary conceptualization of identity as unmoored from social structure is foreign to most premodern social settings, where self- and other-identifications are generally understood as following directly from social structure. See for example Peter Berger, "On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honor," pp. 172-181 in *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

³⁶ Alberto Melucci, "The Process of Collective Identity," in *Social Movements and Culture*, ed.

line between "identity" as a category of analysis and as a category of practice is often blurred.

3. Understood as a core aspect of (individual or collective) "selfhood" or as a fundamental condition of social being, "identity" is invoked to point to something allegedly *deep, basic, abiding, or foundational*. This is distinguished from more superficial, accidental, fleeting, or contingent aspects or attributes of the self, and is understood as something to be valued, cultivated, supported, recognized, and preserved.³⁹ This usage is characteristic of certain strands of the psychological (or psychologizing) literature, especially as influenced by Erikson,⁴⁰ though it also appears in the literature on race, ethnicity, and nationalism. Here too the practical and analytical uses of "identity" are frequently conflated.
4. Understood as a product of social or political action, "identity" is invoked to highlight the *processual, interactive* development of the kind of collective self-understanding, solidarity, or "groupness" that can make collective action possible. In this usage, found in certain strands of the "new social movement" literature, "identity" is understood both as a *contingent*

Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

³⁷ Much recent work on gender, to be sure, has criticized as "essentialist" the idea that women share a fundamental sameness. Yet certain strands of recent work nonetheless predicates such "sameness" of some "group" defined by the *intersection* of gender with other categorical attributes (race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation). See for example Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991).

³⁸ See for example Harold R. Isaacs, *Idols of the Tribe: Group Identity and Political Change* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Walker Connor, "Beyond Reason: The Nature of the Ethnonational Bond," reprinted in Connor's *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

³⁹ For a sophisticated historical and philosophical account, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁴⁰ For a key statement by Erikson himself, see *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, p. 22.

product of social or political action and as a ground or basis of further action.⁴¹

5. Understood as the evanescent product of multiple and competing discourses, "identity" is invoked to highlight the *unstable, multiple, fluctuating, and fragmented* nature of the contemporary "self." This usage is found especially in the literature influenced by Foucault, post-structuralism, and post-modernism.⁴² In somewhat different form, without the post-structuralist trappings, it is also found in certain strands of the literature on ethnicity - notably in "situationalist" or "contextualist" accounts of ethnicity.⁴³

Clearly, the term "identity" is made to do a great deal of work. It is used to highlight noninstrumental modes of action; to focus on self-understanding rather than self-interest; to designate sameness across persons or sameness over time; to capture allegedly core, foundational aspects of selfhood; to deny that such core, foundational aspects exist; to highlight the processual, interactive development of solidarity and collective self-understanding; and to stress the fragmented quality of the contemporary experience of "self," a self unstably patched together through shards of discourse and contingently "activated" in differing contexts.

These usages are not simply heterogeneous; they point in sharply differing directions. To be sure, there are affinities between certain of them, notably between the second and third, and between the fourth and fifth. And the first usage is general enough to be compatible with all of

⁴¹ See for example Calhoun, "The Problem of Identity in Collective Action"; Melucci, "The Process of Collective Identity"; Roger Gould, *Insurgent Identities: Class, Community and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁴² See for example Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996).

⁴³ See for example Richard Werbner, "Multiple Identities, Plural Arenas," in Richard Werbner

the others. But there are strong tensions as well. The second and third uses both highlight *fundamental sameness* -- sameness across persons and sameness over time--while the fourth and fifth uses both *reject* notions of fundamental or abiding sameness.

"Identity," then, bears a multivalent, even contradictory theoretical burden. Do we really need this heavily burdened, deeply ambiguous term? The overwhelming weight of scholarly opinion suggests that we do.⁴⁴ Even the most sophisticated theorists, while readily acknowledging the elusive and problematic nature of "identity," have argued that it remains indispensable. Critical discussion of "identity" has thus sought not to jettison but to save the term by reformulating it so as to make it immune from certain objections, especially from the dreaded charge of "essentialism." Thus Stuart Hall characterizes identity as "an idea which cannot be

and Terence Ranger (eds.), *Postcolonial Identities in Africa* (London: Zed, 1996), 1-26.

⁴⁴ Two important, although partial, exceptions deserve note. Walter Benn Michaels has formulated a brilliant and provocative critique of the concept of "cultural identity" in "Race into Culture." But that essay focuses less on analytical uses of the notion of "identity" than on the difficulty of specifying what makes "our" culture or "our" past count as "our own" --when the reference is not to one's *actual* cultural practices or one's *actual* personal past but to some putative group culture or group past -- without implicitly invoking the notion of "race." He concludes that "our sense of culture is characteristically meant to displace race, but... culture has turned out to be a way of continuing rather than repudiating racial thought. It is only the appeal to race that ... gives notions like losing our culture, preserving it, [or] ...restoring people's culture to them. . . their pathos" (61-62). Richard Handler argues that "we should be as suspicious of 'identity' as we have learned to be of 'culture,' 'tradition,' 'nation,' and 'ethnic group'" (27), but then pulls his critical punches. His central argument -- that the salience of "identity" in contemporary Western, especially American society "does not mean that the concept can be applied unthinkingly to other places and times" (27) - is certainly true, but it implies that the concept *can* be fruitfully applied in contemporary Western settings, something that other passages in the same article and his own work on Québécois nationalism tend to call into account. See "Is 'Identity' a Useful Cross-Cultural Concept?" in *Commemorations: the Politics of National Identity*, ed. John Gillis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); the quotations are from p. 27. See also Handler, *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).

thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all."⁴⁵ What these key questions are, and why they cannot be addressed without "identity," remain obscure in Hall's sophisticated but opaque discussion.⁴⁶ Hall's comment echoes an earlier formulation of Claude Lévi-Strauss, characterizing identity is "a sort of virtual center (*foyer virtuel*) to which we must refer to explain certain things, but without it ever having a real existence."⁴⁷ Lawrence Grossberg, concerned by the narrowing preoccupation of cultural studies with the "theory and politics of identity," nonetheless repeatedly assures the reader that he does "not mean to reject the concept of identity or its political importance in certain struggles" and that his "project is not to escape the discourse of identity but to relocate it, to rearticulate it."⁴⁸ Alberto Melucci, a leading exponent of identity-oriented analyses of social movements, acknowledges that "the word *identity* ... is semantically inseparable from the idea of permanence and is perhaps, for this very reason, ill-suited to the processual analysis for which I am arguing."⁴⁹ Ill-suited or not, "identity" continues to find a central place in Melucci's writing.

We are not persuaded that "identity" is indispensable. We will sketch below some alternative analytical idioms that can do the necessary work without the attendant confusion.

⁴⁵ Stuart Hall, "Who Needs 'Identity'?" p. 2.

⁴⁶ "I use 'identity' to refer to the meeting point, the point of *suture*, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" (*ibid.*, pp 5-6).

⁴⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss, concluding remarks to Lévi-Strauss, ed, *L'identité*, p. 332.

⁴⁸ Lawrence Grossberg, "Identity and Cultural Studies: Is That All There Is," in Stuart Hall, ed., *Questions of Cultural Identity*, pp. 87-88).

Suffice it to say for the moment that if one wants to argue that particularistic self-understandings shape social and political action in a non-instrumental manner, one can simply say so. If one wants to trace the process through which persons sharing some categorical attribute come to share definitions of their predicament, understandings of their interest, and a readiness to undertake collective action, it is best to do so in a manner that highlights the contingent and variable relationship between mere categories and bounded, solidary groups. If one wants to examine the meanings and significance people give to constructs such as "race," "ethnicity," and "nationality," one already has to thread through conceptual thickets, and it is not clear what one gains by aggregating them under the flattening rubric of identity. And if one wants to convey the late modern sense of a self being constructed and continuously reconstructed out of a variety of competing discourses--and remaining fragile, fluctuating and fragmented--it is not obvious why the word identity captures the meaning being conveyed.

"Strong" and "weak" understandings of "identity"

We suggested at the outset that "identity" tends to mean either too much or too little. This point can now be elaborated. Our inventory of the uses of "identity" has revealed not only great heterogeneity but a strong antithesis between positions that highlight fundamental or abiding sameness and stances that expressly reject notions of basic sameness. The former can be called strong or hard conceptions of identity, the latter weak or soft conceptions.

Strong conceptions of "identity" preserve the common-sense meaning of the term -- the emphasis on sameness over time or across persons. And they accord well with the way the term

⁴⁹ Melucci, "The Process of Collective Identity," p. 46.

is used in most forms of identity politics. But precisely because they adopt for analytical purposes a category of everyday experience and political practice, they entail a series of deeply problematic assumptions:

1. Identity is something all people have, or ought to have, or are searching for.
2. Identity is something all groups (at least groups of a certain kind - e.g. ethnic, racial, or national) have, or ought to have.
3. Identity is something people (and groups) can have without being aware of it. In this perspective, identity is something to be *discovered*, and something about which one can be *mistaken*. The strong conception of identity thus replicates the Marxian epistemology of class.
4. Strong notions of collective identity imply strong notions of group boundedness and homogeneity. They imply high degrees of groupness, an "identity" or sameness between group members, a sharp distinctiveness from nonmembers, a clear boundary between inside and outside.⁵⁰

Given the powerful challenges from many quarters to substantialist understandings of groups and essentialist understandings of identity, one might think we have sketched a "straw man" here. Yet in fact strong conceptions of "identity" continue to inform important strands of

⁵⁰ Here the blurring between categories of analysis and categories of practice is particularly striking. As Richard Handler has argued, scholarly conceptions of "nation" and "national identity" have tended to replicate key features of nationalist ideology, notably the axiomatic understanding of boundedness and homogeneity in the putative "nation" (*Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec*). The same argument could be made about "race" or "ethnicity."

the literature on gender, race, ethnicity, and nationalism.⁵¹

Weak understandings of "identity," by contrast, break consciously with the everyday meaning of the term. It is such weak or "soft" conceptions that have been heavily favored in theoretical discussions of "identity" in recent years, as theorists have become increasingly aware of and uncomfortable with the strong or "hard" implications of everyday meanings of "identity." Yet this new theoretical "common sense" has problems of its own. We sketch three of these.

The first is what we call "clichéd constructivism." Weak or soft conceptions of identity are routinely packaged with standard qualifiers indicating that identity is multiple, unstable, in flux, contingent, fragmented, constructed, negotiated, and so on. These qualifiers have become so familiar -indeed obligatory- in recent years that one reads (and writes) them virtually automatically. They risk becoming mere place-holders, gestures signaling a stance rather than words conveying a meaning.

Second, it is not clear why weak conceptions of "identity" are conceptions *of identity*. The everyday sense of "identity" strongly suggests at least some self-sameness over time, some persistence, something that remains identical, the same, while other things are changing. What is the point in using the term "identity" if this core meaning is expressly repudiated?

Third, and most important, weak conceptions of identity may be *too* weak to do useful theoretical work. In their concern to cleanse the term of its theoretically disreputable "hard" connotations, in their insistence that identities are multiple, malleable, fluid, and so on, soft

⁵¹ See for example Isaacs, *Idols of the Tribe*; Connor, "Beyond Reason: The Nature of the Ethnonational Bond."

identitarians leave us with a term so infinitely elastic as to be incapable of performing serious analytical work.

We are not claiming that the strong and weak versions sketched here jointly exhaust the possible meanings and uses of "identity." Nor are we claiming that sophisticated constructivist theorists have not done interesting and important work using "soft" understandings of identity. We will argue, however, that what is interesting and important in this work often does not depend on the use of "identity" as an analytical category. Consider three examples.

Margaret Somers, criticizing scholarly discussions of identity for focusing on categorical commonality rather than on historically variable relational embeddedness, proposes to "reconfigur[e] the study of identity formation through the concept of narrative," to "incorporate into the core conception of identity the categorically destabilizing dimensions of time, space, and relationality." Somers makes a compelling case for the importance of narrative to social life and social analysis, and argues persuasively for situating social narratives in historically specific relational settings. She focuses on the ontological dimension of narratives, on the way in which narratives not only represent but, in an important sense, constitute social actors and the social world in which they act. What remains unclear from her account is why - and in what sense - it is *identities* that are constituted through narratives and formed in particular relational settings. Social life is indeed pervasively "storied"; but it is not clear why this "storiedness" should be axiomatically linked to identity. People everywhere and always tell stories about themselves and others, and locate themselves within culturally available repertoires of stories. But in what sense does it follow that such "narrative location endows social actors with identities - however multiple, ambiguous, ephemeral, or conflicting they may be"? What does this soft, flexible

notion of identity add to the argument about narrativity? The major analytical work in Somers' article is done by the concept of narrativity, supplemented by that of relational setting; the work done by the concept of identity is much less clear.⁵²

Introducing a collection on *Citizenship, Identity, and Social History*, Charles Tilly characterizes identity as a "blurred but indispensable" concept and defines it "an actor's experience of a category, tie, role, network, group or organization, coupled with a public representation of that experience; the public representation often takes the form of a shared story, a narrative." But what is the relationship between this encompassing, open-ended definition and the work Tilly wants the concept to do? What is gained, analytically, by labeling *any* experience and public representation of *any* tie, role, network, etc. as an *identity*? When it comes to examples, Tilly rounds up the usual suspects: race, gender, class, job, religious affiliation, national origin. But it is not clear what analytical leverage on these phenomena can be provided by the exceptionally capacious, flexible concept of identity he proposes. Highlighting "identity" in the title of the volume signals an openness to the cultural turn in the social history and historical sociology of citizenship; beyond this, it is not clear what work the concept does. Justly well known for fashioning sharply focused, "hard-working" concepts, Tilly here faces the difficulty that confronts most social scientists writing about identity today: that of devising a concept "soft" and flexible enough to satisfy the requirements of relational, constructivist social

⁵² Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity"; the quotations are from pp. 605, 606, 614, and 618. See also Somers' "Narrativity, Narrative Identity, and Social Action: Rethinking English Working-Class Formation," *Social Science History* 16 (4) (Winter 1992):591-630. For another argument for seeing identity in terms of narrative, see Denis-Constant Martin, "The Choices of Identity," *Social Identities* 1, 1 (1995), 5-20; see also idem, "Introduction: Identités et politique: Récit, mythe, et idéologie," pp. 13-38 in Denis-Constant Martin, ed., *Cartes d'identité: Comment dit-on "nous" en politique?* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences

theory, yet robust enough to have purchase on the phenomena that cry out for explanation, some of which are quite "hard."⁵³

Craig Calhoun uses the Chinese student movement of 1989 as a vehicle for a subtle and illuminating discussion of the concepts of identity, interest, and collective action. Calhoun explains students' readiness to "knowingly risk death" in Tiananmen square on the night of June 3, 1989 in terms of an honor-bound identity or sense of self, forged in the course of the movement itself, to which students became increasingly and, in the end, irrevocably committed. His account of the shifts in the students' lived sense of self during the weeks of their protest - as they were drawn, in and through the dynamics of their struggle, from an originally "positional," class-based self-understanding as students and intellectuals to a broader, emotionally charged identification with national and even universal ideals - is a compelling one. Here too, however, the crucial analytical work appears to be done by a concept other than identity - in this case, that of honor. Honor, Calhoun observes, "is imperative in a way interest is not." But it is also imperative in a way *identity*, in the weak sense, is not. Calhoun subsumes honor under the rubric of identity, and presents his argument as a general one about the "constitution and transformation of identity." Yet his fundamental argument in this paper, it would seem, is not about identity in general, but about the way in which a compelling sense of honor can, in extraordinary circumstances, lead people to undertake extraordinary actions, lest their core sense of self be

Politiques, 1994).

⁵³ Charles Tilly, "Citizenship, Identity and Social History," pp. 1 - 17 in *Citizenship, Identity and Social History*, ed. Charles Tilly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). The quotations are from p. 7.

radically undermined.⁵⁴

Identity in this exceptionally strong sense - as a sense of self that can imperatively require interest-threatening or even life-threatening action - has little to do with identity in the weak or soft sense. Calhoun himself underscores the incommensurability between "ordinary identity - self-conceptions, the way people reconcile interests in everyday life" and the imperative, honor driven sense of self that can enable or even require "bravery to the point of apparent foolishness."⁵⁵ Calhoun provides a powerful characterization of the latter; but it is not clear what analytical work is done by the former, more general conception of identity.

In his edited volume on *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, Calhoun works with this more general understanding of identity. "Concerns with individual and collective identity," he observes, "are ubiquitous." It is certainly true that "we know of no people without names, no languages or cultures in which some manner of distinctions between self and other, we and they are not made."⁵⁶ But it is not clear why this implies the ubiquity of identity, unless we dilute "identity" to the point of designating *all* practices involving naming and self-other distinctions. Calhoun - like Somers and Tilly - goes on to make illuminating arguments on a range of issues concerning claims of commonality and difference in contemporary social movements. Yet while such claims are indeed often framed today in an idiom of "identity," it is not clear that adopting

⁵⁴ Craig Calhoun, "The Problem of Identity in Collective Action," in Joan Huber, ed., *Macro Micro Linkages in Sociology* (Newbury Park, Ca: Sage, 1991). The quotations are from pp. 53, 67, and 64.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 68, 51.

⁵⁶ Craig Calhoun, "Social Theory and the Politics of Identity," in Calhoun, ed., *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 9.

that idiom for *analytical* purposes is necessary or even helpful.

In other words

What alternative terms might stand in for "identity," doing the theoretical work "identity" is supposed to do without its confusing, contradictory connotations? Given the great range and heterogeneity of the work done by "identity," it would be fruitless to look for a *single* substitute, for such a term would be as overburdened as "identity" itself. Our strategy has been rather to unbundle the thick tangle of meanings that have accumulated around the term "identity," and to parcel out the work to a number of less congested terms. We sketch three clusters of terms here.

Identification and Categorization. As a processual, active term, derived from a verb, "identification" lacks the reifying connotations of "identity."⁵⁷ It invites us to specify the agents that do the identifying. And it does not presuppose that such identifying (even by powerful agents, such as the state) will necessarily result in the internal sameness, the distinctiveness, the bounded groupness that political entrepreneurs may seek to achieve. Identification -- of oneself and of others -- is intrinsic to social life; "identity" in the strong sense is not.

One may be called upon to identify oneself- to characterize oneself, to locate oneself vis-à-vis known others, to situate oneself in a narrative, to place oneself in a category - in any number of different contexts. In modern settings, which multiply interactions with others not

⁵⁷ On the merits of "identification," see Hall, "Who Needs 'Identity'?" Although Hall's is a Foucauldian/post-Freudian understanding of "identification," drawing on the "discursive and psychoanalytic repertoire," and quite different from that proposed here, he does usefully warn that identification is "almost as tricky as, though preferable to, 'identity' itself; and certainly no guarantee against the conceptual difficulties which have beset the latter" (p. 2). See also Andreas Glaeser, "Divided in Unity: The Hermeneutics of Self and Other in the Postunification Berlin Police" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1997), esp. Chapter 1.

personally known, such occasions for identification are particularly abundant. They include innumerable situations of everyday life as well as more formal and official contexts. How one identifies oneself- and how one is identified by others - may vary greatly from context to context; self- and other-identification are fundamentally situational and contextual.

One key distinction is between *relational* and *categorical* modes of identification. One may identify oneself (or another person) by position in a relational web (a web of kinship, for example, or of friendship, patron-client ties, or teacher-student relations). On the other hand, one may identify oneself (or another person) by membership in a class of persons sharing some categorical attribute (such as race, ethnicity, language, nationality, citizenship, gender, sexual orientation, etc). Craig Calhoun has argued that, while relational modes of identification remain important in many contexts even today, categorical identification has assumed ever greater importance in modern settings.⁵⁸

Another basic distinction is between self-identification and the identification and categorization of oneself by others.⁵⁹ Self-identification takes place in dialectical interplay with external identification, and the two need not converge.⁶⁰ External identification is itself a varied process. In the ordinary ebb and flow of social life, people identify and categorize others, just as they identify and categorize themselves. But there is another key type of external identification

⁵⁸ Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 36ff.

⁵⁹ For an anthropological perspective, usefully extending the Barthian model, see Richard Jenkins, "Rethinking Ethnicity: Identity, Categorization and Power," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17, no. 2 (April 1994): 197-223, and Jenkins, *Social Identities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

⁶⁰ Peter Berger, "Modern Identity," pp. 163-4, makes a similar point, though he phrases it in terms of a dialectic - and possible conflict - between subjective and objective identity.

that has no counterpart in the domain of self-identification: the formalized, codified, objectified systems of categorization developed by powerful, authoritative institutions.

The modern state has been one of the most important agents of identification and categorization in this latter sense. In culturalist extensions of the Weberian sociology of the state, notably those influenced by Bourdieu and Foucault, the state monopolizes, or seeks to monopolize, not only legitimate physical force but also legitimate symbolic force, as Bourdieu puts it. This includes the power to name, to identify, to categorize, to state what is what and who is who. There is a burgeoning sociological and historical literature on such subjects. Some scholars have looked at "identification" quite literally: as the attachment of definitive markers to an individual via passport, fingerprint, photograph, and signature, and the amassing of such identifying documents in state repositories. When, why, and with what limitations such systems have been developed turns out to be no simple problem.⁶¹ Other scholars emphasize the modern state's efforts to inscribe its subjects onto a classificatory grid: to identify and categorize people in relation to gender, religion, property-ownership, ethnicity, literacy, criminality, or sanity. Censuses apportion people across these categories, and institutions -- from schools to prisons -- sort out individuals in relation to them. To Foucauldians in particular, these individualizing and aggregating modes of identification and classification are at the core of what defines

⁶¹ Gérard Noiriel, *La tyrannie du national* (Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1991), pp. 155-180; *idem*, "L'identification des citoyens: naissance de l'état civil Républicain," *Genèses* 13, Fall 1993, pp. 3-28; *idem*, "Surveiller les déplacements ou identifier les personnes? Contribution à l'histoire du passeport en France de la I^{er} à la III^e République," *Genèses* 30 (1998): 77-100; Béatrice Fraenkel, *La signature: genèse d'un signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992). A number of scholars, including Jane Caplan, historian at Bryn Mawr College, and John Torpey, sociologist at University of California, Irvine, are currently engaged in projects on passports and other identification documents.

"governmentality" in a modern state.⁶²

The state is thus a powerful "identifier," not because it can create "identities" in the strong sense - in general, it cannot - but because it has the material and symbolic resources to impose the categories, classificatory schemes, and modes of social counting and accounting with which bureaucrats, judges, teacher, and doctors must work and to which non-state actors must refer.⁶³ But the state is not the only "identifier" that matters. As Charles Tilly has shown, categorization does crucial "organizational work" in all kinds of social settings, including families, firms, schools, social movements, and bureaucracies of all kinds.⁶⁴ Even the most powerful state does not monopolize the production and diffusion of identifications and categories; and those that it does produce may be contested. The literature on social movements - "old" as well as "new" - is rich in evidence on how movement leaders challenge official identifications and propose alternative ones.⁶⁵ It highlights leaders' efforts to get members of putative constituencies to identify themselves in a certain way, to see themselves - for a certain

⁶² Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in Graham Burchell et al., eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87-104. Similar conceptions have been applied to colonial societies, especially in regard to the way colonizers' schemes for classification and enumeration shape and indeed constitute the social phenomena (such as "tribe" and "caste" in India) being classified. See in particular Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism And its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁶³ On the dilemmas, difficulties, and ironies involved in "administering identity," in authoritatively determining who belongs to what category in the implementation of race-conscious law, see Christopher A. Ford, "Administering Identity: The Determination of 'Race' in Race-Conscious Law," *California Law Review* 82 (1994): 1231-1285.

⁶⁴ Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998)

⁶⁵ Melissa Nobles, "'Responding with Good Sense': The Politics of Race and Censuses in Contemporary Brazil." Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 1995.

range of purposes - as "identical" with one another, to identify emotionally as well as cognitively with one another.⁶⁶

The social movement literature has valuably emphasized the interactive, discursively mediated processes through which collective solidarities and self-understandings develop. Our reservations concern the move from discussing the work of identification - the efforts to build a collective self-understanding - to positing "identity" as their necessary result. By considering authoritative, institutionalized modes of identification together with alternative modes involved in the practices of everyday life and the projects of social movements, one can emphasize the hard work and long struggles over identification as well as the uncertain outcomes of such struggles. However, if the outcome is always presumed to be an "identity" - however provisional, fragmented, multiple, contested, and fluid - one loses the capacity to make key distinctions.

"Identification," we noted above, invites specification of the agents that do the identifying. Yet identification does not *require* a specifiable "identifier"; it can be pervasive and influential without being accomplished by discrete, specified persons or institutions. Identification can be carried more or less anonymously by discourses or public narratives.⁶⁷ Although close analysis of such discourses or narratives might well focus on their instantiations in particular discursive or narrative utterances, their force may depend not on any particular instantiation but on their anonymous, unnoticed permeation of our ways of thinking and talking and making sense of the social world.

⁶⁶ See for example Melucci, "The Process of Collective Identity"; Martin, "The Choices of Identity."

⁶⁷ Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?"; Margaret Somers, "The Narrative

There is one further meaning of "identification," briefly alluded to above, that is largely independent of the cognitive, characterizing, classificatory meanings discussed so far. This is the psychodynamic meaning, derived originally from Freud.⁶⁸ While the classificatory meanings involve identifying oneself (or someone else) *as* someone who fits a certain description or belongs to a certain category, the psychodynamic meaning involves identifying oneself emotionally *with* another person, category, or collectivity. Here again, "identification" calls attention to complex (and often ambivalent) *processes*, while the term "identity," designating a *condition* rather than a *process*, implies too easy a fit between the individual and the social.

Self-understanding and Social Location. "Identification" and "categorization" are active, processual terms, derived from verbs, and calling to mind particular acts of identification and categorization performed by particular identifiers and categorizers. But we need other kinds of terms as well to do the varied work done by "identity." Recall that one key use of "identity" is to conceptualize and explain action in a non-instrumental, non-mechanical manner. In this sense, the term suggests ways in which individual and collective action can be governed by particularistic understandings of self and social location rather than by putatively universal, structurally determined interests. "Self-understanding" is therefore the second term we would propose as an alternative to "identity." It is a dispositional term that designates what might be called "situated subjectivity": one's sense of who one is, of one's social location, and of how (given the first two) one is prepared to act. As a dispositional term, it belongs to the realm of what Pierre Bourdieu has called *sens pratique*, the practical sense -- at once cognitive and

Constitution of Identity."

⁶⁸ See Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 2ff; and Alan Finlayson, "Psychology, psychoanalysis and theories of nationalism," *Nations and Nationalism* 4, no. 2 (1998), pp. 157ff.

emotional -- that persons have of themselves and their social world.⁶⁹

The term "self-understanding," it is important to emphasize, does not imply a distinctively modern or Western understanding of the "self" as a homogeneous, bounded, unitary entity. A sense of who one is can take many forms. The social processes through which persons understand and locate themselves may in some instances involve the psychoanalyst's couch and in others participation in spirit possession cults.⁷⁰ In some settings, people may understand and experience themselves in terms of a grid of intersecting categories; in others, in terms of a web of connections of differential proximity and intensity. Hence the importance of seeing self-understanding and social locatedness in relation to each other, and of emphasizing that both the bounded self and the bounded group are culturally specific rather than universal forms.

Like the term "identification," "self-understanding" lacks the reifying connotations of "identity." Yet it is not restricted to situations of flux and instability. Self-understandings may be variable across time and across persons, but they may be stable. Semantically, "identity" implies sameness across time or persons; hence the awkwardness of continuing to speak of "identity" while repudiating the implication of sameness. "Self-understanding," by contrast, has no

⁶⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique* (translated in revised form as *The Logic of Practice*).

⁷⁰ An extensive anthropological literature on African and other societies, for example, describes healing cults, spirit possession cults, witchcraft eradication movements, and other collective phenomena that help to constitute particular forms of self-understanding, particular ways in which individuals situate themselves socially. See studies ranging from classics by Victor Turner, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society: A Study of Ndembu Village Life* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1957) and I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1971) to more recent work by Paul Stoller, *Fusion of the Worlds: An Ethnography of Possession Among The Songhay Of Niger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) and Janice Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men and The Zar Cult In Northern Sudan* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

privileged semantic connection with sameness or difference.

Two closely related terms are "self-representation" and "self-identification." Having discussed "identification" above, we simply observe here that, while the distinction is not sharp, "self-understandings" may be tacit; even when they are formed, as they ordinarily are, in and through prevailing discourses, they may exist, and inform action, without themselves being discursively articulated. "Self-representation" and "self-identification," on the other hand, suggest at least some degree of explicit discursive articulation.

"Self-understanding" cannot, of course, do *all* the work done by "identity." We note here three limitations of the term. First, it is a subjective, autoreferential term. As such, it designates *one's own* understanding of who one is. It cannot capture *others'* understandings, even though external categorizations, identifications, and representations may be decisive in determining how one is regarded and treated by others, indeed in shaping one's own understanding of oneself. At the limit, self-understandings may be overridden by overwhelmingly coercive external categorizations.⁷¹

Second, "self-understanding" would seem to privilege cognitive awareness. As a result, it would seem not to capture -- or at least not to highlight -- the affective or cathectic processes suggested by some uses of "identity." Yet self-understanding is never purely cognitive; it is always affectively tinged or charged, and the term can certainly accommodate this affective dimension. However, it is true that the emotional *dynamics* are better captured by the term

⁷¹ For a poignant example, see Slavenka Drakulic's account of being "overcome by nationhood" as a result of the war in the former Yugoslavia, in *The Balkan Express* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), pp. 50-52.

"identification" (in its psychodynamic meaning).

Finally, as a term that emphasizes situated subjectivity, "self-understanding" does not capture the objectivity claimed by strong understandings of identity. Strong, objectivist conceptions of identity permit one to distinguish "true" identity (characterized as deep, abiding, and objective) from "mere" self-understanding (superficial, fluctuating, and subjective). If identity is something to be discovered, and something about which one can be mistaken, then one's momentary self-understanding may not correspond to one's abiding, underlying identity. However analytically problematic these notions of depth, constancy, and objectivity may be, they do at least provide a reason for using the language of identity rather than that of self-understanding.

Weak conceptions of identity provide no such reason. It is clear from the constructivist literature why weak understandings of identity are *weak*, but it is not clear why they are conceptions *of identity*. In this literature, it is the various *soft predicates* of identity - constructedness, contestedness, contingency, instability, multiplicity, fluidity - that are emphasized and elaborated, while that which they are predicated *of* - identity itself - is taken for granted and seldom explicated. When identity itself is elucidated, it is often represented as something -- a sense of who one is,⁷² a self-conception⁷³ -- that can be captured in a straightforward way by "self-understanding." This term lacks the allure, the buzz, the theoretical pretensions of "identity," but this should count as an asset, not a liability.

⁷² See for example Peter Berger, "Modern Identity: Crisis and Continuity," p. 162.

⁷³ See for example Craig Calhoun, "The problem of identity in collective action," p. 68, characterizing "ordinary identity."

Commonality, Connectedness, Groupness. One particular form of affectively charged self-understanding that is often designated by "identity" - especially in discussions of race, religion, ethnicity, nationalism, gender, sexuality, social movements, and other phenomena conceptualized as involving *collective* identities - deserves separate mention here. This is the emotionally laden sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group, involving both a felt solidarity or oneness with fellow group members and a felt difference from or even antipathy to specified outsiders.

The problem is that "identity" is used to designate *both* such strongly groupist, exclusive, affectively charged self-understandings *and* much looser, more open self-understandings, involving some sense of affinity or affiliation, commonality or connectedness to particular others, but lacking a sense of overriding oneness vis-a-vis some constitutive "other."⁷⁴ Both the tightly groupist and the more loosely affiliative forms of self-understanding - as well as the transitional forms between these polar types - are important, but they shape personal experience and condition social and political action in sharply differing ways.

Rather than stirring all self-understandings based on race, religion, ethnicity, and so on into the great conceptual melting pot of "identity," we would do better to use a more differentiated analytical language. Terms such as commonality, connectedness, and groupness could be usefully employed here in place of the all-purpose "identity." This is the third cluster of terms we propose. "Commonality" denotes the sharing of some common attribute,

⁷⁴ For a good example of the latter, see Mary Waters' analysis of the optional, exceptionally unconstraining ethnic "identities" - or what Herbert Gans has called the "symbolic ethnicity" - of third- and fourth generation descendants of European Catholic immigrants to the United States in *Ethnic Options* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990).

"connectedness" the relational ties that link people. Neither commonality nor connectedness alone engenders "groupness" -- the sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded, solidary group. But commonality and connectedness together may indeed do so. This was the argument Charles Tilly put forward some time ago, building on Harrison White's idea of the "catnet," a set of persons comprising both a *category*, sharing some common attribute, and a *network*.⁷⁵ Tilly's suggestion that groupness is a joint product of the "catness" and "netness" -- categorical commonality and relational connectedness -- is suggestive. But we would propose two emendations.

First, categorical commonality and relational connectedness need to be supplemented by a third element, what Max Weber called a *Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl*, a feeling of belonging together. Such a feeling may indeed depend in part on the degrees and forms of commonality and connectedness, but it will also depend on other factors such as particular events, their encoding in compelling public narratives, prevailing discursive frames, and so on. Second, relational connectedness, or what Tilly calls "netness," while crucial in facilitating the sort of collective action Tilly was interested in, is not always necessary for "groupness." A strongly bounded sense of groupness may rest on categorical commonality and an associated feeling of belonging together with minimal or no relational connectedness. This is typically the case for large-scale collectivities such as "nations": when a diffuse self-understanding as a member of a particular nation crystallizes into a strongly bounded sense of groupness, this is likely to depend not on

⁷⁵ Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978), pp. 62ff.

relational connectedness, but rather on a powerfully imagined and strongly felt commonality.⁷⁶

The point is not, as some partisans of network theory have suggested, to turn from commonality to connectedness, from categories to networks, from shared attributes to social relations.⁷⁷ Nor is it to celebrate fluidity and hybridity over belonging and solidarity. The point in suggesting this last set of terms is rather to develop an analytical idiom sensitive to the multiple forms and degrees of commonality and connectedness, and to the widely varying ways in which actors (and the cultural idioms, public narratives, and prevailing discourses on which they draw) attribute meaning and significance to them. This will enable us to distinguish instances of strongly binding, vehemently felt groupness from more loosely structured, weakly constraining forms of affinity and affiliation.

Three Cases: "identity" and its alternatives in context

Having surveyed the work done by "identity," indicated some limitations and liabilities of the term, and suggested a range of alternatives, we seek now to illustrate our argument -- both the critical claims about "identity" and the constructive suggestions regarding alternative idioms -- through a consideration of three cases. In each case, we suggest, the identitarian focus on bounded groupness limits the sociological - and the political - imagination, while alternative analytical idioms can help open up both.

⁷⁶ On the centrality of categorical commonality to modern nationalism, see Handler, *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec*, and Calhoun, *Nationalism*, chapter 2.

⁷⁷ See for example the discussion of the "anti-categorical imperative" in Mustafa Emirbayer and Jeff Goodwin, "Network Analysis, Culture, and the Problem of Agency," *American Journal of*

A Case from Africanist Anthropology: "The" Nuer

African studies has suffered from its version of identitarian thinking, most extremely in journalistic accounts that see Africans' "tribal identity" as the main cause of violence and of the failure of the nation-state. Academic Africanists were troubled by this reductive vision of Africa since at least the 1970s and attracted to a version of constructivism, well before such an approach had a name.⁷⁸ The argument that ethnic groups are not primordial but the products of history-- including the reifying of cultural difference through imposed colonial identifications --became a staple of African studies. Even so, scholars tended to emphasize boundary-formation rather than boundary crossing, the constitution of groups rather than the development of networks.⁷⁹ In this

Sociology 99, 6 (May 1994), 1414.

⁷⁸ Lonsdale, "When Did the Gusii or Any Other Group Become a Tribe?" *Kenya Historical Review* 5, 1 (1977): 355-68; Abner Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Migrants in Yoruba Towns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969). Anthropologists were influenced by the work of Fredrick Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), especially Barth's "Introduction," 9-38. More recent and systematic constructivist accounts include Jean-Loup Amselle and Elikia M'Bokolo (eds.), *Au coeur de l'ethnie: ethnies, tribalisme et état en Afrique* (Paris: Editions la Decouverte, 1985); Leroy Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Africa," in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 211-62.

⁷⁹ Identity talk has become popular among Africanists in recent years, and the typical insistence that identity is multiple is rarely followed by explanation of why that which is multiplied should be considered identity. For a case in point, see Richard Werbner, "Multiple Identities, Plural Arenas," in Richard Werbner and Terence Ranger (eds.), *Postcolonial Identities in Africa* (London: Zed, 1996), 1-26. Africanist scholars have been critical of the concepts of race and ethnicity, but often still use "identity" in an unexamined way. See for example the special issue of *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20, 3 (1994), coordinated by Edwin N. Wilmsen, Saul Dubow, and John Sharp, "Ethnicity and Identity in Southern Africa." A more reflective approach--deploying a range of terms to indicate different forms of affiliation and examining

context, it is worth going back to a classic of African ethnology: E. E. Evans-Pritchard's book *The Nuer*.⁸⁰

Based on research in Northeast Africa in the 1930s, *The Nuer* describes a distinctively relational mode of identification, self-understanding, and social location, one that construes the social world in terms of the degree and quality of connection among people rather than in terms of categories, groups, or boundaries. Social location is defined in the first instance in terms of lineage, consisting of the descendants of one ancestor reckoned through a socially conventional line: patrilineal, via males in the case of Nuer, via females or more rarely via double descent systems in other parts of Africa. Children belong to the lineage of their fathers, and while relationships with the mother's kin are not ignored, they are not part of the descent system. A segmentary lineage can be diagrammed as follows:

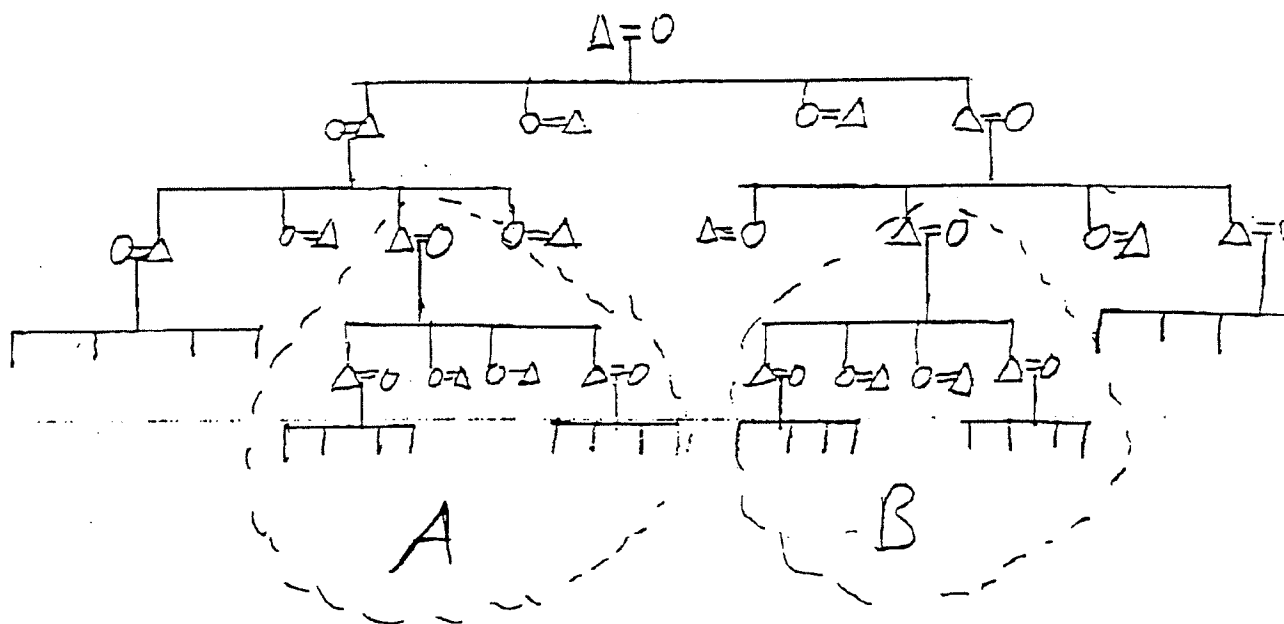
[diagram of segmentary patrilineage]

Everybody in this diagram is related to everybody else, but in different ways and to different degrees. One might be tempted to say that the people marked in circle A constitute a group, with an "identity" of A, as distinct from those in circle B, with an "identity" of B. The trouble with such an interpretation is that the very move which distinguishes A and B also shows their relatedness, as one moves back one generation and finds a common ancestor, who may or may not be living but whose social location links people in A and B. If someone in set A gets into a conflict with someone in set B, such a person may well try to invoke the commonality of

what "identical" actually means in particular contexts--may be found in Claude Fay, "Car nous ne faisons qu'un!": identités, équivalences, homologues au Maasina (Mali)," *Cahiers des Sciences Humaines* 31, 2 (199-5) 427-56. Identitarian positions are severely criticized in and by Jean-Francois Bayart, *L'illusion identitaire* (Paris: Fayard, 1996).

⁸⁰ E. P. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1937).

DIAGRAM OF SEGMENTARY PATRILINEAGE



"A-ness" to mobilize people against B. But someone genealogically older than these parties can invoke the linking ancestors to cool things off. The act of going deeper in a genealogical charter in the course of social interaction keeps reemphasizing relational visions of social location at the expense of categorical ones.

One could argue that this patrilineage as a whole constitutes an identity, distinct from other lineages. But Evans-Pritchard's point is that segmentation represents an entire social order, and that lineages themselves are related to one another as male and female lineage members are to each other. Then let us consider marriage. Virtually all segmentary societies insist on exogamy; and, in evolutionary perspective, the prevalence of exogamy may reflect the advantages of cross-lineage connectedness. So the male-centered lineage diagram presumes another set of relationships, through women who are born into the lineage of their fathers but whose sons and daughters belong to the lineage they married into.

One could then argue that all the lineages which intermarried constitute the "Nuer" as an identity distinct from "Dinka" or any of the other groups in the region. But here recent work in African history offers a more nuanced approach. The genealogical construction of relationality offers possibilities for extension more supple than the twentieth-century scholar's tendency to look for a neat boundary between inside and outside. Marriage relations could be extended beyond the Nuer (both via reciprocal arrangements and coercively by forcing captive women into marriage). Strangers--encountered via trade, migration, or other form of movement--could be incorporated as fictive kin or more loosely linked to a patrilineage via blood brotherhood. The people of northeastern Africa migrated extensively, as they tried to find better ecological niches or as lineage segments moved in and out of relations with each other. Traders stretched their kinship relations over space, formed a variety of relationships at the interfaces with agricultural

communities, and sometimes developed lingua franca to foster communication across large spatial networks.⁸¹ In many parts of Africa, one finds certain organizations--religious shrines, initiation societies--that cross linguistic and cultural distinctions, offering what Paul Richards calls a "common 'grammar'" of social experience within regions, for all the cultural variation and political differentiation that they contain.⁸²

The problem with subsuming these forms of relational connectedness under the "social construction of identity" is that linking and separating get called by the same name, making it harder to grasp the processes, causes, and consequences of differing patterns of crystallizing difference and forging connections. Africa was far from a paradise of sociability, but war and peace both involved flexible patterns of affiliation as well as differentiation.

One should not assume that the principles of a sliding scale of connection are unique to small-scale "tribal" society. We know from the study of larger scale political organizations--with authoritative rulers and elaborate hierarchies of command--that kinship networks remained an important principle of social life. African kings asserted their authority by developing patrimonial relations with people from different lineages, creating a core of support that cross cut lineage affiliations, but they also used lineage principles to consolidate their own power, cementing marriage alliances and expanding the size of the royal lineage.⁸³ In almost all societies, kinship concepts are symbolic and ideological resources, yet while they shape norms,

⁸¹ See the pioneering study of Abner Cohen, "Cultural Strategies in the Organization of Trading Diasporas," in Claude Meillassoux (ed.), *The Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

⁸² Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone* (Oxford: Culreya, 1996).

self-understandings and perceptions of affinity, they do not necessarily produce kinship "groups."⁸⁴

To a greater extent than the forms of domination that preceded it, colonial rule attempted a one-to-one mapping of people with some putatively common characteristic onto territory. These imposed identifications could be powerful, but their effects depended on the actual relationships and symbolic systems that colonial officials--and indigenous cultural entrepreneurs as well--had to work with, and on countervailing efforts of others to maintain, develop, and articulate different sorts of affinities and self-understandings. The colonial era did indeed witness complex struggles over identification, but it flattens our understanding of these struggles to see them as producing "identities." People could live with shadings--and continued to do so day by day even when political lines were drawn.

Sharon Hutchinson's remarkable reanalysis of Evans-Pritchard's "tribe" takes such an argument into a contemporary, conflict-ridden situation. Her aim is "to call into question the very idea of 'the Nuer' as a unified ethnic identity."⁸⁵ She points to the fuzziness of the boundaries of people now called Nuer: culture and history do not follow such lines. And she suggests that Evans-Pritchard's segmentary schema gives excessive attention to the dominant male elders of the 1930s, and not enough to women, men in less powerful lineages, or younger men and women. In this analysis, it not only becomes difficult to see Nuerness as an identity,

⁸³ John Lonsdale, "States and Social Processes in Africa," *African Studies Review* 24, 2/3 (1981): 139-225.

⁸⁴ Jane Guyer, "Household and Community," *African Studies Review* 24, 2/3 (1981): 87-137; Jean-Loup Amselle, *Logiques métisses: Anthropologie de l'identité, en Afrique et ailleurs* (Paris: Payot, 1990).

but imperative to examine with precision how people tried both to extend and to consolidate connections. Bringing the story up to the era of civil war in the southern Sudan in the 1990s, Hutchinson refuses to reduce the conflict to one of cultural or religious difference between the warring parties and insists instead on a deep analysis of political relationships, struggles for economic resources, and spatial connections.

In much of modern Africa, indeed, some of the most bitter conflicts have taken place within collectivities that are relatively uniform culturally and linguistically (Rwanda, Somalia) and between loose economic and social networks based more on patron-client relations than ethnic affiliation (Angola, Sierra Leone), as well as in situations where cultural distinction has been made into a political weapon (Kwa Zulu in South Africa).⁸⁶ To explain present or past conflict in terms of how people construct and fight for their "identities" risks providing a prefabricated, presentist, teleological explanation that diverts attention from questions such as those addressed by Hutchinson.

East European nationalism

We have argued that the language of identity, with its connotations of boundedness, groupness, and sameness, is conspicuously ill suited to the analysis of segmentary lineage societies - or to present-day conflicts in Africa. One might accept this point yet argue that

⁸⁵ Sharon Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 29.

⁸⁶ Gerard Prunier, *The Rwandan Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) and Jean-Pierre Chrétien, *Le défi de l'ethnisme: Rwanda et Burundi: 1990-1996* (Paris: Karthala, 1997). Similarly, Richards's account of conflict in Sierra Leone is notable for his stress on networks over groups, on creolization over differentiation, and on overlapping moral visions over conflicts of "cultures" (Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest*).

identitarian language is well suited to the analysis of other social settings, including our own, where public and private "identity talk" is widely current. But we are *not* arguing *only* that the concept of identity does not "travel" well, that it cannot be universally applied to all social settings. We want to make a stronger argument: that "identity" is neither necessary nor helpful as a category of analysis even where it *is* widely used as a category of practice. To this end, we briefly consider East European nationalism and identity politics in the United States.

Historical and social scientific writing on nationalism in Eastern Europe -- to a much greater extent than writing on social movements or ethnicity in North America -- has been characterized by relatively strong or hard understandings of group identity. Many commentators have seen the post-communist resurgence of ethnic nationalism in the region as springing from robust and deeply rooted national identities -- from identities strong and resilient enough to have survived decades of repression by ruthlessly antinational communist regimes. But this "return-of-the-repressed" view is problematic.⁸⁷

Consider the former Soviet Union. To see national conflicts as struggles to validate and express identities that had somehow survived the regime's attempts to crush them is unwarranted. Although antinationalist, and of course brutally repressive in all kinds of ways, the Soviet regime was anything but antinational.⁸⁸ Far from ruthlessly suppressing nationhood, the regime went to unprecedented lengths in institutionalizing and codifying it. It carved up Soviet territory into

⁸⁷ For an elaboration of this argument, see Rogers Brubaker, "Myths and Misconceptions in the Study of Nationalism," in John Hall, ed., *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁸⁸ For a fuller version of this argument, see Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, chapter 2. For a parallel argument about Yugoslavia, see Veljko Vujacic and Victor Zaslavsky, "The Causes of Disintegration in the USSR and Yugoslavia." *Telos* 88 (1991): 120-140.

more than fifty putatively autonomous national "homelands," each "belonging" to a particular ethnonational group; and it assigned each citizen an ethnic "nationality," which was ascribed at birth on the basis of descent, registered in personal identity documents, recorded in bureaucratic encounters, and used to control access to higher education and employment. In doing so, the regime was not simply *recognizing* or *ratifying* a pre-existing state of affairs; it was *newly constituting* both persons and places *as national*.⁸⁹ In this context, strong understandings of national identity as deeply rooted in the pre-communist history of the region, frozen or repressed by a ruthlessly antinational regime, and returning with the collapse of communism are at best anachronistic, at worst simply scholarly rationalizations of nationalist rhetoric.

What about weak, constructivist understandings of identity? Constructivists might concede the importance of the Soviet system of institutionalized multinationality, and interpret this as the institutional means through which national identities were constructed. But why should we assume it is "identity" that is constructed in this fashion? To assume that it is risks conflating a system of *identification* or *categorization* with its presumed result, *identity*. Categorical group denominations -- however authoritative, however pervasively institutionalized -- cannot serve as indicators of real "groups" or robust "identities."

Consider for example the case of "Russians" in Ukraine. At the time of the 1989 census,

⁸⁹ Some peripheral Soviet regions, to be sure, had already experienced national movements in the last years of the Russian empire (and during the ensuing civil war), but even in those regions, the social basis of such movements was weak, and identification with "the nation" was limited to a relatively small part of the population. Elsewhere, the significance of the regime in constituting national divisions was even more prominent. On Soviet "nation-making" in the 1920s, see Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53 (Summer 1995):414-52; Terry D. Martin, "An Affirmative Action Empire: Ethnicity and the Soviet State, 1923-1938," PhD Dissertation, University of

some 11.4 million residents of Ukraine identified their "nationality" as Russian. But the precision suggested by this census data, even when rounded to the nearest hundred thousand, is entirely spurious. The very categories "Russian" and "Ukrainian," as designators of putatively distinct ethnocultural nationalities, or distinct "identities," are deeply problematic in the Ukrainian context, where rates of intermarriage have been high, and where millions of nominal Ukrainians speak only or primarily Russian. One should be skeptical of the illusion of "identity" or bounded groupness created by the census, with its exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories. One can imagine circumstances in which "groupness" might emerge among nominal Russians in Ukraine, but such groupness cannot be taken as given.⁹⁰

The formal institutionalization and codification of ethnic and national categories implies nothing about the *depth*, *resonance*, or *power* of such categories in the lived experience of the persons so categorized. A strongly institutionalized ethnonational classificatory system makes certain categories readily and legitimately available for the representation of social reality, the framing of political claims, and the organization of political action. This is itself a fact of great significance, and the breakup of the Soviet Union cannot be understood without reference to it. But it does not entail that these categories will have a significant role in framing perception, orienting action, or shaping self-understanding in everyday life -- a role that is implied by even constructivist accounts of "identity."

The extent to which official categorizations shape self-understandings, the extent to which the population-categories constituted by states or political entrepreneurs approximate real

Chicago, 1996.

⁹⁰ For data on nationality and language, see Gosudarstvennyi Komitet po Statistike, *Natsional'nyi*

"groups" - these are open questions that can only be addressed empirically. The language of "identity" is more likely to hinder than to help the posing of such questions, for it blurs what needs to be kept distinct: external categorization and self-understanding, objective commonality and subjective groupness.

Consider one final, non-Soviet example. The boundary between Hungarians and Romanians in Transylvania is certainly sharper than that between Russians and Ukrainians in Ukraine. Here too, however, group boundaries are considerably more porous and ambiguous than is widely assumed. The language of both politics and everyday life, to be sure, is rigorously categorical, dividing the population into mutually exclusive ethnonational categories, and making no allowance for mixed or ambiguous forms. But this categorical code, important though it is as a *constituent element* of social relations, should not be taken for a *faithful description* of them. Reinforced by identitarian entrepreneurs on both sides, the categorical code obscures as much as it reveals about self-understandings, masking the fluidity and ambiguity that arise from mixed marriages, from bilingualism, from migration, from Hungarian children attending Romanian-language schools, from intergenerational assimilation (in both directions), and - perhaps most important -- from sheer indifference to the claims of ethnocultural nationality.

Even in its constructivist guise, the language of "identity" disposes us to think in terms of bounded groupness. It does so because even constructivist thinking on identity takes the *existence* of identity as axiomatic. Identity is always already "there," as something that individuals and groups "have," even if the content of particular identities, and the boundaries that mark groups off from one another, are conceptualized as always in flux. Even constructivist

language tends therefore to objectify "identity," to treat it as a "thing," albeit a malleable one, that people "have," "forge," and "construct."

This tendency to objectify "identity" deprives us of analytical leverage. It makes it more difficult for us to treat "groupness" and "boundedness" as *emergent properties* of particular structural or conjunctural settings rather than as always already there in some form. The point needs to be emphasized today more than ever, for the unreflectively groupist language that prevails in everyday life, journalism, politics, and much social research as well -- the habit of speaking without qualification of "Albanians" and "Serbs," for example, as if they were sharply bounded, internally homogeneous "groups" -- not only weakens social analysis but constricts political possibilities in the region.

Identity claims and the enduring dilemmas of "race" in the United States

The language of identity has been particularly powerful in the United States in recent decades. It has been prominent both as an idiom of analysis in the social sciences and humanities and as an idiom in which to articulate experience, mobilize loyalty, and formulate symbolic and material claims in everyday social and political practice.

The pathos and resonance of identity claims in the contemporary United States have many sources, but one of the most profound is that central problem of American history - the importation of enslaved Africans, the persistence of racial oppression, and the range of African American responses to it. The African-American experience of "race" as both imposed categorization and self-identification has been important not only in its own terms, but from the

late 1960s on as a template for identity claims of all sorts, including those based on gender and sexual orientation as well as those based on "ethnicity" or "race."⁹¹

In response to the cascading identitarian claims of the last three decades, public discourse, political argument, and scholarship in nearly every field of the social sciences and humanities have been transformed. There is much that is valuable in this process. History textbooks and prevailing public narratives tell a much richer and more inclusive story than those of a generation ago. Specious forms of universalism - the Marxist category of "worker" who always appears in the guise of a male, the liberal category of "citizen" who turns out to be white - have been powerfully exposed. "First-generation" identitarian claims themselves - and scholarly literatures informed by them - have been criticized for their blindness to cross-cutting particularities: African American movements for acting as if African American women did not have gender-specific concerns, feminists for assuming that all women were white and middle class.

Constructivist arguments have had a particular influence in Americanist circles, allowing scholars to stress the contemporary importance of imposed identifications and the self-understandings that have evolved in dialectical interplay with them, while emphasizing that such self- and other-identified "groups" are not primordial but historically produced. The treatment of race in the historiography of the United States is an excellent example.⁹² Even before "social construction" became a buzz-word, scholars were showing that far from being a given dimension

⁹¹ Gitlin, *Twilight*, 134.

⁹² One of the best introductions to constructivist analysis in American history is Earl Lewis, "Race," in Stanley Kutler, eds., *Encyclopedia of the United States in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Scribners, 1996), 129-160. See also Barbara Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* 181 (May-June 1990), pp 95-118.

of America's past, race as a political category originated in the same moment as America's republican and populist impulses. Edmund Morgan argued that in early 18th century Virginia, white indentured servants and black slaves shared a subordination that was not sharply differentiated; they sometimes acted together. It was when Virginian planter elites started to mobilize against the British that they needed to draw a sharp boundary between the politically included and the excluded, and the fact that black slaves were more numerous and replaceable as laborers and less plausible as political supporters led to a marking of distinction, which poor whites could in turn use to make claims.⁹³ From such an opening, historians have charted several key moments of redefinition of racial boundaries in the United-States--and several points at which other sorts of ties showed the possibility of giving rise to other kinds of political affiliation. Whiteness and blackness were both historically created and historically variable categories. Comparative historians, meanwhile, have shown that the construction of race can take still more varied forms, showing that many people who were "black" under north American classificatory systems would have been something else in other parts of the Americas.⁹⁴

American history thus reveals the power of imposed identification, but it also reveals the

⁹³ Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975). More recent works on this formative period include a special issue of *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 54, 1 (1997), "Constructing Race: Differentiating Peoples in the Early Modern World," and Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁹⁴ The different ways in which race was configured in the Americas was one of subjects in which comparative history came into being, notably in the aftermath of Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (New York: Knopf, 1946). An influential short statement is Charles Wagley, "On the Concept of Social Race in the Americas," pp. 531-545 in *Contemporary Cultures and Societies in Latin America*, ed. D. B. Heath and R. N. Adams (New York: Random House, 1965). A more recent constructivist argument about the historical specificity of the idea of being "white" is exemplified in David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991).

complexity of the self-understandings of people defined by circumstances they did not control. Pre-Civil War collective self-definitions situated black Americans in particular ways in regard to Africa--often seeing an African (or an "Ethiopian") origin as placing them close to the heartlands of Christian civilization. Yet early back-to-Africa movements often treated Africa as a cultural tabula rasa or as a fallen civilization to be redeemed by African American Christians.⁹⁵ Asserting oneself as a diasporic "people" did not necessarily imply claiming cultural commonality--the two concepts have been in tension with each other ever since. One can write the history of African American self-understanding as the "rise" over time of a black nationality, or one can explore the interplay of such a sense of collectivity with the efforts of African American activists to articulate different kinds of political ideologies and to develop connections with other radicals. The most important point is to consider the range of possibilities and the seriousness with which they were debated.

It is not the historical analysis of social construction as such that is problematic, but the presumptions about what it is that is constructed. It is "whiteness" or "race" that is taken as the typical object of construction, not other, looser forms of affinity and commonality. Setting out to write about "identifications" as they emerge, crystallize, and fade away in particular social and

⁹⁵ One of the foundational texts of what is sometimes considered black nationalism, Martin Delany's account of his voyage to Africa, is notable for its lack of interest in the cultural practices of the Africans he encountered. What counted for him was that a Christian of African origin would find his destiny in ridding himself of oppression in the United States and bringing Christian civilization to Africa. See Martin R. Delany and Robert Campbell, *Search for a Place: Black Separatism and Africa*, ed. Howard H. Bell (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969 [1860]). For an illuminating recent book on African American-African connections -- and the differing ways in which linkages were made while cultural distinctions were emphasized -- see James Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

political circumstances may well inspire a rather different history than setting out to write of an "identity," which links past, present, and future in a single word.

Cosmopolitan interpretations of American history have been criticized for taking the pain out of the distinct ways in which that history has been experienced: above all the pain of enslavement and discrimination, and of struggle against enslavement and discrimination, a history which marks African Americans in ways that white Americans do not share.⁹⁶ Here is where calls for the understanding of the particularity of experience resonate powerfully, but it is also here that the dangers of flattening those histories into a static and singular "identity" are serious. There may be gains as well as losses in such a flattening, as thoughtful participants in debates over the politics of race have made clear.⁹⁷ But to subsume further under the generic category of "identity" the historical experiences and allegedly common "cultures" of other "groups" as disparate as women and the elderly, Native Americans and gay men, poor people and the disabled is not in any obvious way more respectful of the pain of particular histories than are the universalist rhetorics of justice or human rights. And the assignment of individuals to such "identities" leaves many people--who have experienced the uneven trajectories of ancestry and the variety of innovations and adaptations that constitute culture--caught between a hard identity that doesn't quite fit and a soft rhetoric of hybridity, multiplicity, and fluidity that offers neither understanding nor solace.⁹⁸ The question remains whether we can address the complexity of

⁹⁶ Eric Lott, "The New Cosmopolitanism: Whose America?" *Transition* 72 (winter 1996): 108-35.

⁹⁷ For one such contribution, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁹⁸ This is the point emphasized by Walter Benn Michaels: the assignment of individuals to cultural identities is even more problematic than the definition of those identities.

history - including the changing ways in which external categorizations have both stigmatized and humiliated people and given them an enabling and empowering sense of collective selfhood - in more supple and differentiated language. If the real contribution of constructivist social analysis --that affinities, categories, and subjectivities develop and change over time--is to be taken seriously, and not reduced to a presentist, teleological account of the construction of currently existing "groups," then bounded groupness must be understood as a contingent, emergent property, not an axiomatic given.

Representing contemporary American society poses a similar problem -- avoiding flat, reductive accounts of the social world as a multichrome mosaic of monochrome identity groups. This conceptually impoverished identitarian sociology, in which the "intersection" of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and perhaps one or two other categories generates a set of all-purpose conceptual boxes, has become powerful in American academia in the 1990s - not only in the social sciences, cultural studies, and ethnic studies, but also in literature and political philosophy. In the remainder of this section, we shift our angle of vision and consider the implications of the use of this identitarian sociology in the latter domain.

"A moral philosophy," wrote Alisdair MacIntyre, "presupposes a sociology",⁹⁹ the same holds a fortiori of political theory. The problem with much contemporary political theory is that it is built on questionable sociology - indeed precisely on the group-centered representation of the social world just mentioned. We are not taking the side of "universality" against "particularity" here. Rather, we are suggesting that the identitarian language and groupist social

⁹⁹ Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 22.

ontology that informs much contemporary political theory occludes the problematic nature of "groupness" itself and forecloses other ways of conceptualizing particular affiliations and affinities.

There is a considerable literature now that is critical of the idea of universal citizenship. Iris Marion Young, one of the most influential of such critics, proposes instead an ideal of group-differentiated citizenship, built on group representation and group rights. The notion of an "impartial general perspective," she argues, is a myth, since "different social groups have different needs, cultures, histories, experiences, and perceptions of social relations." Citizenship should not seek to transcend such differences, but should recognize and acknowledge them as "irreducible."¹⁰⁰

What sort of differences should be ratified with special representation and rights? The differences in question are those associated with "social groups," defined as "comprehensive identities and ways of life," and distinguished from mere aggregates on the one hand -- arbitrary classifications of persons according to some attribute -- and from voluntary associations on the other. Special rights and representation would be accorded not to all social groups, but to those who suffer from at least one of five forms of oppression. In practice, this means "women, blacks, Native Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and other Spanish-speaking Americans, Asian Americans, gay men, lesbians, working-class people, poor people, old people, and mentally and physically disabled people."¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Iris Marion Young, "Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship" *Ethics* 99 (January 1989), 257, 258. See also Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

¹⁰¹ Young, "Polity and Group Difference," 267, 261.

What constitutes the "groupness" of these "groups"? What makes them groups rather than categories around which self- and other-identifications may but certainly do not necessarily or always crystallize? This is not addressed by Young. She assumes that distinctive histories, experiences, and social location endow these "groups" with different "capacities, needs, culture, and cognitive styles" and with "distinctive understandings of all aspects of the society and unique perspectives on social issues."¹⁰² Social and cultural heterogeneity is construed here as a juxtaposition of internally homogeneous, externally bounded blocs. The "principles of unity" that Young repudiates at the level of the polity as a whole - because they "hide difference" - are reintroduced, and continue to hide difference, at the level of the constituent "groups."

At stake in arguments about group-differentiated or "multicultural" citizenship are important issues that have been long debated outside as well as inside the academy, all having to do in one way or another with the relative weight and merits of universalist and particularist claims.¹⁰³ Sociological analysis cannot and should not seek to resolve this robust debate, but it can seek to shore up its often shaky sociological foundations. It can offer a richer vocabulary for conceptualizing social and cultural heterogeneity and particularity. Moving beyond identitarian language opens up possibilities for specifying other kinds of connectedness, other idioms of identification, other styles of self-understanding, other ways of reckoning social location. To paraphrase what Adam Przeworsky said long ago about class, cultural struggle is a struggle

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 267, 268.

¹⁰³ See especially the lucid and influential books by Will Kymlicka: *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1991) and *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

about culture, not a struggle between cultures.¹⁰⁴ Activists of identity politics deploy the language of bounded groupness not because it reflects social reality, but precisely because groupness is ambiguous and contested. Their groupist rhetoric has a performative, constitutive dimension, contributing, when it is successful, to the making of the groups it invokes.¹⁰⁵

Here we have a gap between normative arguments and activist idioms that take bounded groupness as axiomatic and historical and sociological analyses that emphasize contingency, fluidity, and variability. At one level there is a real-life dilemma: preserving cultural distinctiveness depends at least in part on maintaining bounded groupness and hence on policing the "exit option," and accusations of "passing" and of betraying one's roots serve as modes of discipline.¹⁰⁶ Critics of such policing, however, would argue that a liberal polity should protect individuals from the oppressiveness of social groups as well as that of the state. At the level of social analysis, though, the dilemma is not a necessary one. We are not faced with a stark choice between a universalist, individualist analytical idiom and an identitarian, groupist idiom. Framing the options in this way misses the variety of forms (other than bounded groups) which affinity, commonality, and connectedness can take—hence our emphasis on the need for a more supple vocabulary. We are not arguing for any specific stance on the politics of cultural distinction and individual choice, but rather for a vocabulary of social analysis that helps open up and illuminate the range of options. The politics of group "coalition" that is celebrated by Young

¹⁰⁴ Adam Przeworski, "Proletariat into a Class: The Process of Class Formation from Karl Kautsky's 'The Class Struggle' to Recent Controversies," *Politics and Society* 7(1977): 343-401.

¹⁰⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, "L'identité et la représentation: Éléments pour une réflexion critique sur l'idée de région." *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 35 (1980): 63-72.

¹⁰⁶ David Laitin, "Marginality: A Microperspective." *Rationality and Society* 7, no. 1 (January 1995): 31-57.

and others, for example, certainly has its place, but the groupist sociology that underlies this particular form of coalition politics -- with its assumption that bounded groups are the basic building blocks of political alliances -- constricts the political imagination.¹⁰⁷

None of this belies the importance of current debates over "universalistic" and "particularistic" conceptions of social justice. Our point is that the identitarian focus on bounded groupness does not help in posing these questions; the debate is in some respects based on misconceptions on both sides. We need not in fact choose between an American history flattened into the experiences and "cultures" of bounded groups and one equally flattened into a single "national" story. Reducing the heterogeneity of American society and history to a multichrome mosaic of monochrome identity groups hinders rather than helps the work of understanding the past and pursuing social justice in the present.

Conclusion: particularity and the politics of "identity"

We have not made an argument about identity politics. Nonetheless, the argument does have political as well as intellectual implications. In some circles, these will be thought to be regressive, to undermine the basis for making particularistic claims. That is neither our intention nor a valid inference from what we have written.

¹⁰⁷ In a debate with Young, the philosopher Nancy Fraser has juxtaposed a politics of "recognition" to one of "redistribution," arguing that both are needed, since some groups are exploited as well as stigmatized or unrecognized. Strikingly, both parties to the debate treat group boundaries as clear-cut, and both therefore conceive of progressive politics as involving intergroup coalitions. Both neglect other forms of political action that do not presuppose commonality or "groupness." Nancy Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age," *New Left Review* 212 (1995): 68-93; Iris Marion Young, "'Unruly Categories,' A Critique of Nancy Fraser's Dual Systems Theory," *ibid.*, 222 (1997):

To persuade people that they are one; that they comprise a bounded, distinctive, solidary group; that their internal differences do not matter, at least for the purpose at hand -- this is a normal and necessary part of politics, and not only of what is ordinarily characterized as "identity politics." It is not all of politics; and we do indeed have reservations about the way in which the routine recourse to identitarian framing may foreclose other equally important ways of framing political claims. But we do not seek to deprive anyone of "identity" as a political tool, or to undermine the legitimacy of making political appeals in identitarian terms.

Our argument has focused, rather, on the use of "identity" as an *analytical* concept. Throughout the article, we have asked what work the concept is supposed to do, and how well it does it. We have argued that the concept is deployed to do a great deal of analytical work -- much of it legitimate and important. "Identity," however, is ill suited to perform this work, for it is riddled with ambiguity, riven with contradictory meanings, and encumbered by reifying connotations. Qualifying the noun with strings of adjectives -- specifying that identity is multiple, fluid, constantly re-negotiated, and so on -- does not solve the Orwellian problem of entrapment in a word. It yields little more than a suggestive oxymoron -- a multiple singularity, a fluid crystallization -- but still begs the question of why one should use the same term to designate all this and more. Alternative analytical idioms, we have argued, can do the necessary work without the attendant confusion.

At issue here is not the legitimacy or importance of particularistic claims, but how best to conceptualize them. People everywhere and always have particular ties, self-understandings, stories, trajectories, histories, predicaments. And these inform the sorts of claims they make. To

subsume such pervasive particularity under the flat, undifferentiated rubric of "identity," however, does nearly as much violence to its unruly and multifarious forms as would an attempt to subsume it under "universalist" categories such as "interest."

Construing particularity in identitarian terms, moreover, constricts the political as well as the analytical imagination. It points away from a range of possibilities for political action other than those rooted in putatively shared identity -- and not only those that are praised or damned as "universalist." Identitarian political advocates, for example, construe political cooperation in terms of the building of coalitions between bounded identity groups. This is one mode of political cooperation, but not the only one.

Kathryn Sikkink and Margaret Keck, for example, have drawn attention to the importance of "transnational issue networks," from the antislavery movement of the early nineteenth century to international campaigns about human rights, ecology, and women's rights in recent years. Such networks necessarily cross cultural as well as state boundaries and link particular places and particularistic claims to wider concerns. To take one instance, the antiapartheid movement brought together South African political organizations that were themselves far from united--some sharing "universalist" ideologies, some calling themselves "Africanist," some asserting a quite local, culturally defined "identity"--with international church groups, labor unions, pan-African movements for racial solidarity, human rights groups, and so on. Particular groups moved in and out of cooperative arrangements within an overall network; conflict among opponents of the apartheid state was sometimes bitter, even deadly. As the actors in the network shifted, the issues at stake were reframed. At certain moments, for example, issues amenable to international mobilization were highlighted, while others--of great

concern to some would-be participants--were marginalized.¹⁰⁸

Our point is not to celebrate such networks over more exclusively identitarian social movements or group-based claims. Networks are no more intrinsically virtuous than identitarian movements and groups are intrinsically suspect. Politics - in Southern Africa or elsewhere - is hardly a confrontation of good universalists or good networks versus bad tribalists. Much havoc has been done by flexible networks built on clientage and focused on pillage and smuggling; such networks have sometimes been linked to "principled" political organizations; and they have often been connected to arms and illegal merchandise brokers in Europe, Asia, and North America. Multifarious particularities are in play, and one needs to distinguish between situations where they cohere around particular cultural symbols and situations where they are flexible, pragmatic, readily extendable. It does not contribute to precision of analysis to use the same words for the extremes of reification and fluidity, and everything in between.

To criticize the use of "identity" in social analysis is not to blind ourselves to particularity. It is rather to conceive of the claims and possibilities that arise from particular affinities and affiliations, from particular commonalities and connections, from particular stories and self-understandings, from particular problems and predicaments in a more differentiated manner. Social analysis has become massively, and durably, sensitized to particularity in recent decades; and the literature on identity has contributed valuably to this enterprise. It is time now to go beyond "identity" -- not in the name of an imagined universalism, but in the name of the

¹⁰⁸ Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Audie Klotz, *Norms in International Relations: The Struggle Against Apartheid* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995). See also the classic study of Jeremy Boissevain, *Friends of Friends: Networks*,

conceptual clarity required for social analysis and political understanding alike.

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