

## Beyond “identity”

ROGERS BRUBAKER and FREDERICK COOPER

*University of California, Los Angeles; University of Michigan*

“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.”<sup>1</sup> The argument of this article 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 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 better 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 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?

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“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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

### **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.<sup>3</sup> 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).<sup>4</sup> The most important and best-known trajectory involved the appropriation and popularization of the work of Erik Erikson (who was responsible, among other things, for coining the term “identity crisis”).<sup>5</sup> But as Philip Gleason has shown,<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

For a variety of reasons, the term identity proved highly resonant in the 1960s,<sup>9</sup> 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 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,"<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> Our point here is simply that the weakness of class politics in the United States (vis-à-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 clichés."<sup>2</sup> But that was only the beginning. In the 1980s, with the rise of race, class, and gender as the "holy trinity" of literary criticism and cultural studies,<sup>13</sup> the humanities joined the fray in full force. And "identity talk" – inside and outside academia – continues to proliferate today.<sup>14</sup> The "identity" crisis – a crisis of overproduction and consequent devaluation of meaning – shows no sign of abating.<sup>15</sup>

Qualitative as well as quantitative indicators signal the centrality – indeed the inescapability – of “identity” as a topos. In recent years, two new interdisciplinary journals devoted to the subject, complete with star-studded editorial boards, have been launched.<sup>16</sup> 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, David Laitin, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Paul Ricoeur, Amartya Sen, Margaret Somers, Charles Taylor, Charles Tilly, and Harrison White.<sup>17</sup>

### 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.<sup>18</sup> 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 among their practical and analytical uses.<sup>19</sup>

“Identity,” too, is both a category of practice and a category of analysis. As a category of 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.<sup>20</sup> 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 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.<sup>21</sup> Nor does one have to use “race” as a category of analysis – which risks taking for granted that “race” exists – to understand and analyze social and political practices oriented to the presumed existence of putative “races.”<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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 category of analysis.<sup>24</sup> 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.”<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> “Essentialism” has indeed been vigorously criticized, and constructivist gestures now accompany most discussions of “identity.”<sup>27</sup> Yet we often find an uneasy amalgam of constructivist language and essentialist argumentation.<sup>28</sup> This is not a matter of intellectual sloppiness. Rather, it reflects the dual 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.<sup>29</sup> Nor is the solution to be found in a more consistent constructivism: for it is not clear why what is routinely characterized as multiple, fragmented, and fluid should be conceptualized as “identity” at all.

### The uses of “identity”

What do scholars mean when they talk about “identity?”<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> 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*.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> The second is 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.<sup>34</sup> 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).<sup>35</sup>

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,<sup>36</sup> on gender,<sup>37</sup> and on race, ethnicity, and nationalism.<sup>38</sup> In this usage, the 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.<sup>39</sup> This usage is characteristic of certain strands of the psychological (or psychologizing) literature, especially as influenced by Erikson,<sup>40</sup> 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 product* of social or political action and as a ground or basis of further action.<sup>41</sup>

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.<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup>

Clearly, the term “identity” is made to do a great deal of work. It is used to highlight non-instrumental 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 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.<sup>44</sup> 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 thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all.”<sup>45</sup> What these key questions are, and why they cannot be addressed without “identity,” remain obscure in Hall’s sophisticated but opaque discussion.<sup>46</sup> Hall’s comment echoes an earlier formulation of Claude Lévi-Strauss, characterizing identity as “a sort of virtual center (*foyer virtuel*) to which we must refer to explain certain things, but without it ever having a real existence.”<sup>47</sup> 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.”<sup>48</sup> 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.”<sup>49</sup> Ill-suited or not, “identity” continues to find a central place in Melucci’s writing.

We are not persuaded that “identity” is indispensable. We sketch below some alternative analytical idioms that can do the necessary work without the attendant confusion. 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 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 among group members, a sharp distinctiveness from nonmembers, a clear boundary between inside and outside.<sup>50</sup>

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 the literature on gender, race, ethnicity, and nationalism.<sup>51</sup>

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 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 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 dimen-

sions 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’s 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.<sup>52</sup>

Introducing a collection on *Citizenship, Identity, and Social History*, Charles Tilly characterizes identity as a “blurred but indispensable” concept and defines it as “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 theory, yet robust enough to have purchase on the phenomena that cry out for explanation, some of which are quite “hard.”<sup>53</sup>

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 interests are 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 article, 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 radically undermined.<sup>54</sup>

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 people to be "brave to the point of apparent foolishness."<sup>55</sup> 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."<sup>56</sup> 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 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.”<sup>57</sup> 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 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.<sup>58</sup>

Another basic distinction is between self-identification and the identification and categorization of oneself by others.<sup>59</sup> Self-identification takes place in dialectical interplay with external identification, and the two need not converge.<sup>60</sup> 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 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.<sup>61</sup> 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 “governmentality” in a modern state.<sup>62</sup>

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, teachers, and doctors must work and to which non-state actors must refer.<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup> It highlights leaders’ efforts to get members of putative constituencies to identify themselves in a certain way, to see themselves – for a certain range of purposes – as “identical” with one another, to identify emotionally as well as cognitively with one another.<sup>66</sup>

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.<sup>67</sup> 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.

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.<sup>68</sup> 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 emotional – that persons have of themselves and their social world.<sup>69</sup>

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.<sup>70</sup> 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 impor-

tance 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 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, auto-referential 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.<sup>71</sup>

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 “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, contingency, instability, multiplicity, fluidity – that are emphasized and elaborated, while what 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,<sup>72</sup> a self-conception<sup>73</sup> – 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.

### *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-à-vis some constitutive

“other.”<sup>74</sup> 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, “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*.<sup>75</sup> 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 relational connectedness, but rather on a powerfully imagined and strongly felt commonality.<sup>76</sup>

The point is not, as some partisans of network theory have suggested, to turn from commonality to connectedness, from categories to net-

works, from shared attributes to social relations.<sup>77</sup> 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.

#### *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 have been 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.<sup>78</sup> 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.<sup>79</sup> In this context, it is worth going back to a classic of African ethnology: E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s book *The Nuer*.<sup>80</sup>

Based on research in Northeast Africa in the 1930s, *The Nuer* describes a distinctively relational mode of identification, self-understanding,