

Collective Identity

Concept: Collective Identity

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Description Collective identity is generally acknowledged as a major catalyst for change throughout history. The concept refers to the component of one's identity held in common with a larger group. It manifests as a shared feeling of "we" or "groupness," and often coalesces around common social or political objectives. These common goals derive in part from the group's shared sense of identity, and also contribute, in circular fashion, to binding and reinforcing the group's sense of solidarity and collective identity. This mutual reinforcement between identity and goals may help explain the tremendous transformative power collective identity has historically produced.

Examples of social and political movements in the twentieth century that derived much of their power from collective identity include movements as ideologically diverse as: the Bolshevik revolution; the rise of Nazi and Imperial Japanese fascism; the numerous post-World War II movements for colonial independence; the civil rights, second wave feminist, and gay pride movements in the United States; the growth of the Japanese industrial economy from the 1960s through the late 80s; and the multiple and various movements involved in the conflicts in the Middle East throughout the twentieth century, and especially since WWII. The diversity of these examples demonstrates that collective identity may coalesce around many different factors or combination of factors, including class, race, ethnicity, indigenous connection to the land, common position as subjects of oppression, gender, sexual orientation, national pride, or religion. In addition to these factors, specific ideas and goals are often intrinsic to any given collective identity. For example, ideas and goals usually serve as the basis for the collective action of NGOs or international charity organizations, whose members may then begin to identify as a collective through their shared sense of purpose in realizing the ideas and goals of the organization's mission.

Although its conceptual origins trace back to Marx and Durkheim in the nineteenth century, collective identity as a concept for theorizing social and political movements only began to gain serious momentum fairly recently. This momentum is great, however, generating an enormous volume of research in the past several decades in academic fields as diverse as sociology, history, international relations, philosophy, law, and literary studies.

Collective identity differs in important ways from two other kinds of identity — individual and social. Individual identity is self-identified; it is what is

identified by use of the word "I." It is generally comprised of individual traits unique to the self, such as physical appearance and attributes, personality, conscious and unconscious wants and desires, and personal experience and history. Social identity, by contrast, is comprised of the categories and roles that come from the society to which one is born. While individual identity is self-determined, social identity is other-determined — it is embodied in the other's use of the word "you." Social identity is tied to many factors that arise from the interactions of individuals in a society, such as class standing, family or clan history, employment, and reputation.

In post-enlightenment Western culture, individual identity is often thought of as a source of authenticity — it is perceived as something essential to the self, and in some sense "truer" and more authentic than one's social identity. Some thinkers, such as Frantz Fanon and Charles Taylor, argue that individuals often internalize their imposed social identities, mistaking "inauthentic" social identity for "authentic" and intrinsic individual identity. This misrecognition results in harmful oppression when the individuals in question internalize demeaning self-images. Fanon in particular exposes this psychological mechanism as an important strategy of the colonizer to subjugate indigenous populations. Collective identity has proven a useful counter to this imperial strategy, for it provides a basis for rejecting the demeaning self-images deployed by the colonizer, and replacing them with more positive and affirming images, leading to greater agency and autonomy for the colonized peoples.

If the self proclaims individual identity when it says "I," and society dispenses social identity when it pronounces "you," then the group claims collective identity when it announces "we." Like social identity, and unlike individual identity, collective identity derives from the individual's relationship to others in a larger community. Unlike its social counterpart, however, collective identity shares with individual identity a sense of autonomy and self-direction. It is not imposed by an extrinsic society, but is instead self-identified by the individuals themselves. This quality of self-identification enables collective identity to share individual identity's claims to authenticity, while also making social and communal goals intrinsic to this authentic identity.

Collective identity has proven a useful basis for resistance to colonization, and by extension to neo-colonialist economic globalization. Collective identity provides a counter to the demeaning self-images imposed by the colonizer (examples in the colonial era would include images of non-Westerners as dumb, lazy, shiftless, and incapable of self-governance; examples in the neo-colonial era might include a more subtle image of the "modern industrial worker" climbing the economic ladder into the middle class — an image not as blatantly demeaning as it might be misleading or deceitful). The authentic quality of collective identity as a self-determined self-image gives the movement autonomy and agency. No longer the passive recipients of the colonizer's image, the collective asserts its own self-image, an image often formed around concrete political goals. The

mutually reinforcing relationship between solidarity and goals means that as the collective works toward its goals, its identity increasingly solidifies, and the movement gains further momentum and strength.

Suggested
Reading:

Fanon, Frantz. 1963. *The wretched of the earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington, New York: Grove Press.

Heyes, Cressida. 2002. Identity politics. In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (accessed 29 November 2006)

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