

Identity

Concept: Identity

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Description Identity can be defined as the interplay of characteristics that make up the individuality and uniqueness of any person or group. Such uniqueness comes from a particular combination of traits, be they physical, emotional, psychological, social, economic, political, or cultural. Identity can also be seen as an open process of identification and location, in which individuals and groups attempt to negotiate their sense of autonomy on both a global and regional scale. In an age when constant flows of ideas, images, ways of life, particular values, and material and abstract goods — understood as processes of globalization — are constantly permeating physical borders, what is the impact of such flows on traditional accounts and perceptions of identity? Have such flows transformed people's ideas of who they are? Have such flows made us rethink notions such as manhood, womanhood, selfhood, otherness, nationality, citizenship, and religion?

It can be argued that processes of globalization constantly interact with processes of identification. This argument points to ways in which identity acquires a deeper political aura, as claims to various identities are used for political mobilization as well as contestation in larger political, social, and historical developments of global restructuring. Considering its politicized character, it is no surprise that there have been heated debates concerning the complexities and contradictions that surround both the term and the practice of identity. Although there are conflicting views pertaining to the definition and conceptualization of identity, these fall into two different camps. These differ over whether the boundaries of identity are mobile or fixed, and whether one can and should even be able to talk about identity as a clearly defined notion, one which awaits our impartial and detached investigation. These two major accounts are modernist and postmodernist.

The modernist account focuses particularly on the link between identity and the nation-state (in terms of citizenship), and perceives identity as a rigid concept that governs the construction of cultural and national homogeneity. This account also views identity as a fixed set of characteristics that attach themselves to the persona of an individual and remain there with her, although they may undergo some minor sorts of transformation throughout her life. Thus, a modernist account of identity tends to focus mainly on clearly cut boundaries. For example, a modernist account of a Chinese person's identity would focus on what it means to be Chinese: speaking one of the many dialects existing in China, eating certain foods, looking a certain way, and embracing certain cultural and social values. Such a modernist account of identity would extrapolate certain characteristics to a larger group of people and assume that set of characteristics to be defining

of their identity. Modernist understandings of identity dwell on notions such as the general, the common, the same; on the existence of clear boundaries of identity; and on the fixed nature of identity. According to modernist accounts, a Chinese person will always be a Chinese person, meaning that the sum of traits that account for Chineseness can be extended unproblematically to a large group of people simply because such traits are clearly observable and considered self-evident.

In contrast, a postmodernist account of identity challenges the very notion of identity. Since postmodernism as a philosophical trend is keenly interested in and committed to the blurring of all sorts of boundaries, the very notion of identity conjures up rigid boundaries, and pre-set characteristics that are fixed and unchangeable. Postmodernist accounts point to the fact that identity frequently figures as something that one needs to have in order to claim rights, citizenship, and belonging. Yet, identity can be understood as a discursive category that serves political ends of establishing and maintaining particular relations of power. Thus, it is in the name of identity that wars are fought, genocides committed, and people barred from access to basic human rights. We live in a global world, where people constantly come into contact with different ideas and practices of identity, some of which may challenge their dearly held outlooks. An interesting question arises: in this global world, can one experience belonging and attachment to a particular identity in a manner that does not discriminate against or exclude other world views?

One of postmodernism's major commitments is its respect for difference and plurality. If a modernist account would focus on sameness, a postmodernist account would take into consideration the many differences between people and groups, and would point to the multiplicity of voices that make any sort of claims to a certain identity. Moreover, a postmodernist account of identity would shy away from using "identity" as a term, rather it would prefer the notion of identification, which speaks of mobility, constant transformation, and alteration. The phrase "identification" was coined by the literary critic and post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* (1994).

Accordingly, a postmodernist account of a Chinese person's identification would start by questioning the very idea of Chineseness as a fixed set of characteristics that is made of language, particular physical traits, and cultural and culinary customs. It would argue that being Chinese is rather the performance of an idea of what it means to be Chinese. As such, identification is relational: whatever senses of identity/identification we possess, they do not attach to us as something impersonal handed down from past generations. Rather they can be understood as roles we are constantly performing according to the perceptions others and ourselves have of those particular roles. For example, I am not Romanian because I was born this way and because I speak a certain language, and come from a specific geographical location. Rather I am identified (and I identify myself) as Romanian because of perceptions others have of me and I have

of myself. What it means to be Romanian has come to be defined both by my understanding of it and by others' understandings of it.

In presenting evidence for their account of identity/identification, postmodernists point to contemporary processes of globalization. In a global world, claims to autonomy, based on attachment to a specific identity, coming from either individuals and groups, can collide and conflict (as in the case of various ethnic and religious groups), just as much as they can converge and give rise to transnational mobilizations (as in the case of gay and lesbians rights or the labour rights movements). One particular group that has received a lot of attention within postmodernist approaches is migrants and refugees. The argument is that migrants especially, with their loyalties to more than one culture, undergo a sort of cultural hybridity, which makes their senses of who they are much more complex and controversial. But one can make the case that global flows have impacted greatly not only on displaced individuals, but also on people who have never left their homes. For example, a Moroccan sociologist, Fatema Mernissi, discusses the profound impact of processes of colonialism, modernization, and globalization on the status of women in Morocco. Codes claiming the equality of sexes and a greater autonomy of women coexist with those enforcing the advantages of men in Morocco, leading to a paradoxical situation. As such, it is important to point out that globalization has not simply erased previous boundaries and replaced them with new senses of identity. Rather the reality is a messier one, with traditional senses of identity coexisting and sometimes colliding with altered and contesting senses of who we are.

Suggested
Reading:

Ang, Ien. 1994. On not speaking Chinese: Postmodern ethnicity and the politics of diaspora. *New Formations* 24: 1-18.

Castells, Manuel. 1997. *The power of identity*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Blackwell.

Mernissi, Fatema. 1987. *Beyond the veil. Male-female dynamics in modern Muslim society*. Revised ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.