

SYMPOSIUM
IDENTITY AND LIBERAL POLITICS



THE LIES THAT BIND
RETHINKING IDENTITY
A PRÉCIS

BY
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A Précis

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Introduction

The *Lies that Bind* originated with a series of four lectures that I gave for radio broadcast by the BBC, both in Britain and, through the World Service, around the globe. The lectures were recorded in front of four audiences: first, in London, at the London School of Economics, two of whose four founders were my great-great-aunt, Beatrice Webb, and her husband Sidney; in Glasgow University, home to Adam Smith, one of my intellectual heroes; in Accra, the capital of the country where I grew up; and in New York on the campus of my own university.

As you can see, these talks were meant to be addressed to an audience that was neither academic nor local. That was one reason that the book, like the lectures, seeks to elucidate general ideas through narratives, fictional and historical, from many nations, and draws quite often on individual lives – and on moments in those lives – in which identities of one sort or another played a decisive

role. Half a century of writing philosophy has persuaded me that stories often communicate ideas better than explicit discursive exposition.

I set myself two aims. First, to offer to a broad audience a general account of social identities, informed, to varying degrees, by philosophy, history, literature, and the social sciences; and second, to explore four such identities, in particular, religion, nationality, race, and culture. For the book I added a discussion of class, which struck me as an obvious lacuna, and prefaced the argument with a general discussion of how social identities work, a theoretical picture that lay behind the explorations in the lectures. Another source of identity, gender, weaves its way through the book, beginning with the first chapter, where various forms of gender identity – male and female, cis and trans, gay and straight – provide model cases for the general theory.

That, I think, is inevitable in any contemporary work on identity, because the most comprehensive and significant body of work on the subject has been the work of modern feminist philosophy, which was taking off when I was a young student of philosophy and has continued with increasing depth and sophistication ever since. The first central insight of that body of work, of course, was that we should make some sort of distinction between bodily differences, which arise from the approximate sexual dimorphism that our species shares with most other vertebrates, on the one hand, and the superstructure of consequences that societies build upon that corporeal infrastructure. Simone de Beauvoir wrote famously: “On ne naît pas femme: on le devient” (de Beauvoir 1949, 13). Whatever, exactly, she meant by that, the recognition that there are dimensions of being-a-woman that are not given by nature – in-born – but made in culture, through becoming, has taken hold outside the academy.

There are endless debates, of course, about how to make a sex-gender distinction and in what ways it depends on genetic or other biological differences associated, say, with the absence, in most males, of a second X chromosome. Still, however you draw the lines – and even if, as some would prefer, you deny that there are lines to be drawn (because the binary opposition is itself an artefact imposed on a reality that has no sharp boundaries) – it seems to me that this basic idea is enormously important.

For philosophers, at least in the traditions I grew up in, one instinctive response to an insight such as this, is to seek to generalize it: and that is one of the things the first chapter of the book, on classification, tries to do. In every identity, I argued, there was some set of properties, real or imagined, of human beings that plays the role that sex plays in the sex-gender analysis. It sets the ways in which people assign the labels that I claim are central to the way identities work. This idea – that labels are central, so that the correct account of any identity, will be, in some sense, nominalist – comes more from sociology (from what sociologists call “labelling theory”) than from philosophy.¹ And it suggests two questions about any identity that sociologists have explored in meticulous detail: First, what do people do when they think of themselves under a label, when they think of themselves as, for example, cis, gay, male, American, post-Christian, Anglo-Ghanaian, upper middle class? (That would be me.) What is it, in short, to *identify* as a person of some kind? And the second, equally natural, question is: How do people respond to the labels they assign to others? What forms of *treatment* follow from our identities?

As far as identification is concerned, there are things I do and don’t do because, in some sense, I have a masculine body, things I

¹ One very influential source of the modern theory of labelling is Becker 1963.

might have done even if I didn't have the concept "male." Notably, I can't, and so don't, give birth. (Many women can't do that either, of course. But for women having a male-sexed body is a less common reason.) But there are other things I do and don't do because I *think* of myself as male, things I do *as* a man. I dress as a man, which means I shop for my clothes as a man. I walk like a man, as I was raised to do, so that I have what Pierre Bourdieu dubbed a man's "bodily hexis"; "a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking," as he says in a passage I quoted in the book. And then, on the treatment side, there are things that people do to me because they identify me as a man ... most straight men I know greet me with a handshake, while greeting the women they know as well as they know me with a kiss on the cheek. These habits of response are part of what Bourdieu called our "*habitus*: a set of dispositions to respond more or less spontaneously to the world in particular ways, without much thought" (Bourdieu 69-70). Identity, we can say, is central to the shaping of habitus, both through the ways in which *we* act as people of such-and-such identities and in the way our identity-inflected *treatment* by others shapes our acting-as.

At the start of this book, then, I set out three conceptual features that identities share.

The first was a set of labels and the rules for ascribing them to people. The second: the label had meaning for those who bear it, so that it sometimes shaped their behavior and their feelings, in ways they might or might not be aware of. And the third: the label had significance for the way its bearers were treated by others. (That's why identity has both a subjective and an objective dimension.)

But I also insisted immediately that "[i]n all three domains – labeling, norms, treatment – there can be contest and contention, ..." (Appiah 2018, 141).

One consequence of all that disputation is that there are risks associated with making remarks about what “we” think about identities. The meaning of an identity for each of its bearers will be inflected by their other identities – this point is now routinely recorded by using Kimberlé Crenshaw’s word “intersectionality.” (Crenshaw 1991). But it can also be shaped by individual choices as well. For me, my British-inflected English is part of my way of being American; it reflects my thought that my country is a country of immigrants and has and needs no standard dialect of the language. There is, notoriously, the possibility of many kinds of politics of identity: “[J]ust as there’s usually contest or conflict about the boundaries of the group, about who’s in and who’s out, there’s almost always disagreement about what normative significance an identity has” (Appiah 2018, 10). When someone says “we” there is often some identity loitering in the background, especially in writing, where the indexicality of “us” in speech – the identification of speaker and hearers not by their identity but by their co-presence – cannot do its work. And if the audience and the writer don’t agree in their account of that implicit identity, they may take themselves to be speaking about different groups of people.

The general theory at the start of the book includes not just this analysis of identity, but also some insights drawn from social psychology about how identities are generated. I point out, for example, that children start out naturally essentialist, in the psychologist’s sense of that term. The developmental psychologist Susan Gelman once expressed that idea like this: “Essentialism is the view that certain categories have an underlying reality or true nature that one cannot observe directly, but that gives an object its identity, and is responsible for other similarities that category members share” (Gelman 2004). This feature of our natural modes of thought is captured as well, as I also point out, in the way in which generics are, as Sarah-Jane Leslie has argued our default

mode of generalization (Leslie 2008). And generics – observations like “Tigers eat people” – have a very odd semantics.

“Tigers eat people” doesn’t mean that *most* tigers eat people. In fact, as my friend the philosopher Sarah-Jane Leslie has pointed out, an epidemiologist can sincerely say, “Mosquitoes carry the West Nile virus” ... while knowing that 99 percent of them *don’t* carry it (Appiah 2018, 27).

Other psychological insights that I have found helpful are laid out in that first chapter, one of which is that labelling is pretty easy to get going. Another is that there is a pattern to the psychology of in-groups and out-groups:

There’s a commonsense way of talking about all this. We’re *clannish* creatures. We don’t just belong to human kinds; we prefer our own kind and we’re easily persuaded to take against outsiders (Appiah 2018, 31).

That, then, is a brief overview of what I say about identities in general before turning to the five forms of identity that take up the main chapters. As I said in the preface to the book: “My main message about the five forms of identity that take us from Chapter Two to Chapter Six is, in effect, that we are living with the legacies of ways of thinking that took their modern shape in the nineteenth century, and that it is high time to subject them to the best thinking of the twenty-first” (*ibid.*, xiv). In calling the book *The Lies that Bind*, I wanted to insist on the role of mistaken beliefs – the BBC lectures had been entitled *Mistaken Identities* – in shaping social categories, while at the same time insisting that they bind us together into

groups of shared fate, despite the errors. It was a central part of the argument of my last book, *As If*, that useful theories are very generally strictly speaking false, so that we must ask whether falsehoods are, nevertheless, useful for some purpose before abandoning them. Here, too, it seems to me that sometimes a lie can be true enough. But another lesson of the book, I hope, is that identities are different, and that to get to understand and evaluate them, it is useful to have an historical sense of how they came to have the shape they currently do. So let me say a little about each of the cases now.

I began with religion, in a chapter entitled Creed. That title, unlike the chapter itself, suggests that religious identities are centrally about belief. (That is one problem with having decided to give all the chapters a title beginning with C!) One reason I began the lectures with religion was because it seemed to me that a lot of religious discord in the contemporary world circulated around questions of gender, and this allowed me to explore that strand of identity issues as well.

Every religion can be said to have three dimensions. Sure, there is a body of belief. But there's also what you do – call that practice. And then, as well, there's who you do it with – call that community, or fellowship. The trouble is that we've tended to emphasize the details of belief over the shared practices and the moral communities that buttress religious life. Our English word "orthodoxy" comes from a Greek word that means correct belief. But there's a less familiar word, "orthopraxy" that, comes from another Greek word, $\pi\rho\tilde{\alpha}\xi\iota\varsigma$ (*praxis*), which means action. Orthopraxy is a matter not of *believing* right but of *acting* right (*ibid.*, 36).

That focus on the ways in which religion functions as an identity in shaping groups, their behavior, and their treatment, follows, of course, from the general picture of identities. But there are

problems about the way I suspected many in my global audience would have thought about religion that are specific to this particular class of identities. One, that I explore in some detail, is a tendency to what I called “scriptural determinism, which, in its simplest version, involves the claim that our religious beliefs repose in our sacred texts – that to be a believer is to believe what’s in the scriptures, as if one could decant from them, like wine from an urn, the unchanging nature of a religion and its adherents” (*ibid.*, 44).² One consequence of the arguments against scriptural determinism is that some regular claims about religious traditions – that Islam must treat women as inferior to men, or that Christianity cannot countenance homosexuality – are applications of an idea about scriptural interpretation that is regularly contested within the practices of all the so-called world religions. And there is a more general problem here, which is that this form of determinism ignores the ways in which traditions are constantly being reinterpreted. As I put it at the end of the chapter, after discussing some pre-colonial religious traditions of my Asante homeland:

Our ancestors grip us in ways we scarcely realize. But as I poured the schnapps on the ancient family altars, I found myself reflecting that in the ethical realm – whether civic or religious – we have to recognize that one day we, too, shall be ancestors. We do not merely follow traditions; we create them (Appiah 2018, 67).

² I borrowed the term from Robert Wright’s illuminating *The Evolution of God* (Wright 2009), which describes “scriptural determinists” as “people who think that scripture exerts overwhelming influence on the religious thought of believers, and that their social and political circumstances matter little if at all.”

That is famously also true of nations, which I discussed next in the chapter on Country: there is a vigorous literature in modern historical writing on the invention of traditions in the shaping of nations.³ And the major error about nationality – about the nation as a source of identity – that I went on to explore was that the role of modern states in shaping nations is routinely ignored, not in the historical literature, but in so many everyday discussions. The nineteenth-century growth of a form of nationalism developed in Europe led to the idea that there were national groups – what the Germans called *Völker* – out there waiting for the states they needed to carry out their purposes. As Hegel put it: “In the existence of a *people* [*Volk*] the substantial purpose is to be a state and to maintain itself as such; a people without state-formation (a *nation* as such) has no real history ...”⁴

As I argued, through thinking about the case of the great Italian modernist novelist, Italo Svevo, national belonging can be very complicated and always results from historical processes that include decisions by states about how to label people and about what significance to assign to those labels. In the chapter I look at a range of cases: Svevo, born in the Austrian empire, dying an Italian, without ever leaving home; Ghana, created when I was two; Singapore, a self-consciously multiracial nation, which was born in my teens; Scotland, whose status as British or as European is at the center of contemporary political arguments in the city of Glasgow where I gave the lecture. They are interestingly different in the ways in which they represent the complexity of national identities, in ways I tried to draw out.

³ See, e.g., Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983.

⁴“*In dem Dasein eines Volkes ist der substantielle Zweck, ein Staat zu sein und als solche sich zu erhalten; ein Volk ohne Staatsbildung (ein Nation als solche) hat eigentlich keine Geschichte ...*” (Hegel 1830, § 549.

In the next chapter, on Color, I explored both the history and the present of racial classification. Beginning with the extraordinary story – which it was delightful to be able to tell an audience in Ghana – of the arrival in the early eighteenth century of a black child from what was then known as the Gold Coast at the princely court of Anton Ulrich, Duke of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. Anton Wilhelm Amo, as he came to be known, was the Duke's godson (though he may have started out as his legal property) and, after an education that the family supported, he ended up as a philosopher and a teacher of philosophy. The experiment that was his life took place as ideas about race were shifting in the direction that left the North Atlantic world dominated by a particularly virulent form of racism that shaped both the system of enslavement in the New World and the age of European empires in Africa and Asia that followed. The focus of the chapter is not so much on arguing against biological essentialism about races – though I do that, of course – but on showing both how hugely influential that picture was in shaping the intellectual life of many fields and many practices by the turn of the twentieth century, and how wide a range of political processes around the world remain shaped by these earlier ideas about race.

In the chapter on Class, which follows, I pursue two distinct lines of inquiry. One is about how three rather different dimensions of capital – social, economic, and cultural – determine the workings of social class in the contemporary world. Marxists taught us to think that the economic dimension of social interactions – our relation, as they said, to the means of production – was determinative, at least in the heyday of industrial capitalism. But today it is clear that it is not just our place in the system of production, as workers who make things or serve to others, or as managers or owners of tools and workplace, but other things, such as our education (and, especially, the distinguishing features of

habitus that come with more education) and the connections that our families, schools and workplaces make for us, that determine our life-chances. There are also dimensions of status that are separable from cultural and social capital; and these relate to, but are independent of, the income and wealth that determine our financial situations. There is not one social ladder of class, there are several, though you almost always find the same people at the top – and a different same set of people at the bottom – of each.

The second strand of argument has to do with the idea of meritocracy. The significant inequalities in wealth and in esteem that are a feature of contemporary societies, democratic or not, have come to be seen by many as justified to the extent that access to positions of advantage is earned rather than inherited. This has the consequence that the lowest ranks of our social hierarchies of money, esteem, education, and the rest are seen, on the same picture, as occupied by people who lack either the talent or the will to rise through the ranks. But, as Michael Young, who invented the very word “meritocracy,” anticipated, at the start of the rise of this ideology of merit, there are two great problems with the picture that now dominates such thinking about inequality.

The first is the result of the fact that, as Young put it, “nearly all parents are going to try to gain unfair advantages for their offspring” (Young 1958, 25). And so, once we permit significant inequalities or wealth or status or education or connections to develop, people who have the most of these goods will use them to secure positions of advantage for their children. It will then be simply false that where you end up depends mostly on your talents and your willingness to work. As I argued, “There is nothing wrong with cherishing your children. But a decent society governed by the ideal of merit would have to limit the extent to which this natural impulse permits people to undermine that ideal” (Appiah 2018,

172). We have not done that, I argue, and so the first thing to say about meritocracy is that we are nowhere near achieving it.

This is a familiar claim now, though not everyone accepts it; nor is there enough discussion in my country or in most countries over what we should do about this fact. But there is a second, and, I think more interesting point, which is that in focusing on the question of access to wealth and other advantages, on whether we have proper equality of opportunity, we risk losing track of the question how much inequality there should be at all, however it comes about. A society that has significant inequalities of wealth and of esteem is very likely to end up being a society in which those who fail both have less of these goods and are also deprived of respect and self-respect. The central problem of class, I argue, is not inequality in goods, as such, but the consequent denial of the dignity to those at the bottom of the various social ladders.

I say in the book – and this is, I suppose, the book’s darkest message – that, though I can see how to make our society more genuinely meritocratic, I do not know how to solve this second of meritocracy’s challenges.

There is one more chapter, discussing Culture, which shows up in identities like “Western” or “Confucian” or “Muslim,” used as names for vast groups of people who, though they are enormously diverse in their languages, dress, and practices of everyday life, are nevertheless thought of as having something deep in common. Essentialism here shows up in the idea that Westerners are all naturally prone to individualism or democracy or some such; and it shows up in a different way in the thought that certain valuable cultural products – Shakespeare’s sonnets, Mozart’s music, Nabokov’s novels, Plato’s philosophy – are things on which Westerners have a natural claim, in the way that any Chinese person has a claim on the *I Ching*, or any Japanese person on Basho.

This picture derives, I believe, from ways of thinking about culture – both in the ethnographer’s sense of social-transmitted values, beliefs, and practices and in Matthew Arnold’s sense of the arts – that developed in the later nineteenth century in Europe but have spread and been taken up elsewhere. Two elements of this package strike me as worth stressing: the idea that cultures belong to peoples (and not to individual persons) and the idea that they are organic wholes, so that the music and the literature and the cuisine are somehow interconnected. Together these mistakes conduce to thinking of people of a single culture as naturally fundamentally alike and fundamentally in solidarity with one another for that reason. It is one of the lessons of the book, I hope, that within all the major social identities – not just these so-called cultural groups – there is a wide diversity of belief and practice, and that sharing ideas and values with people of other identities is profoundly rewarding.

As I say towards the end of that chapter:

Values aren’t a birthright: you need to keep caring about them. Living in the West, however you define it – being Western, however you define *that* – provides no guarantee that you will care about Western Civ. The values that European humanists like to espouse belong as much to an African or an Asian who takes them up with enthusiasm as to a European. By that very logic, they *don’t* belong to a European who hasn’t taken the trouble to understand and absorb them. The same is true, naturally, of what we term non-Western cultures (Appiah 2018, 211).

In the Coda I make a few final general observations about how we can work with them to improve the human world. There I stress the fact that identities work in ways that are the result of complex

social negotiations. This has one obvious consequence: you cannot do identity-work all by yourself. As I say:

There is a liberal fantasy in which identities are merely chosen, so we are all free to be what we choose to be. But identities without demands would be useless to us. Identities work only because, once they get their grip on us, they command us, speaking to us as an inner voice; and because others, seeing who they think we are, call on us, too. If you do not care for the shapes your identities have taken, you cannot simply refuse them; they are not yours alone. You have to work with others inside and outside the labeled group in order to reframe them so they fit you better; and you can only do that collective work if you recognize that the results must serve others as well. (*ibid.*, 217-218).

I insist, too, that identities “can become forms of confinement, conceptual mistakes underwriting moral ones,” while, at the same time “they can also give contours to our freedom” (*ibid.*, 218). And, finally, I argue that there is a common humanity – we can dispute whether or not it is, or is yet, an identity – that we need to build on as we negotiate with one another with and through our various identities.

My aim in this introduction has been to say enough to frame the essays that follow, which engage my book so thoughtfully, and to allow them to be read with profit by people who have not themselves read *The Lies that Bind*. Though I hope, of course, that you will feel tempted, as you read on, to do what these colleagues of mine have done: which is to read the book itself with a care and attention that I doubt I deserve.

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