ESSENTIALISM OR THREAT PERCEPTION
ON KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH'S
THE LIES THAT BIND: RETHINKING IDENTITY

BY

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Kwame Anthony Appiah begins his profoundly learned but wonderfully accessible book, *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity*, by reminiscing about rides in taxis, and the inevitable confusions his own identity evokes amongst the cabbies ferrying him about. As a son of a Ghanaian father and an English mother, he is taken for a Brazilian in Sao Paolo, a "Colored" in Cape Town, an Ethiopian in Rome, and an Asian Indian in London. And despite speaking the Queen's English, New York cab drivers are not satisfied when he responds "London" to their queries about his place of birth, since the question they really want to ask is "what are you?" racially or ethnically (Appiah 2018, xi).

Like Appiah, my own liminal identity provokes confusion among cabbies. As the child of South Indian Christian parents, my name – Michael James – does not comply with their expectations

about Indians. And because I am bald and darker than most South Asian immigrants to North American or Europe, I am often thought to be African American. This led to my most troubling taxi experience. Shortly after shaving my head for the first time, I traveled to Manhattan to visit a friend. After arriving at Penn Station, I tried to hail a cab. Despite the plethora of taxis circulating around me, the drivers, most of whom appeared to be South Asian, avoided me. Having never had this problem on previous trips to the city, I remained befuddled, until a white man on the same corner sympathetically conveyed his frustration about cab drivers refusing to pick up black men. Suddenly, the scales dropped from my eyes. Back when I had the wavy hair that coded me as South Asian, cab drivers perceived me as a safe fare. Now that my bald head coded me as black, they saw me as a threat. My follicular failings transformed my public identity, to the point that even Indian cab drivers could not recognize a fellow *desi*.

I focus on this example not simply because it allows me to share taxicab experiences with Appiah, one of my intellectual idols. More important is the different valence of my version of the cabbie experience, which points to a strongly divergent approach to thinking about the problem of identity. By delving deeply into the intricacies of five forms of identity – creed, country, color, class, and culture – Appiah repeatedly forces us to recognize that there is no clear answer to the question "what are you?" His contention is that by undermining our essentialist answers to this question, we can avoid the many identity conflicts that undermine our ability to live peaceful and happy lives. Although I am thoroughly convinced by Appiah's anti-essentialism, I am more skeptical that epistemological transformation will prove nearly as useful in mitigating identity conflict. This is because, as my example suggests, identity conflict is as much a product of threat perception

as it is of outdated 19th century science. As a result, I fear that identity conflict may persist even if all parties recognize the socially constructed and contingent character of identities associated with creed, country, color, class, and culture.

Before expanding upon my critical concerns, let me first appreciate the brilliance of Appiah's own theoretical moves. Note that Appiah's substantive chapters are devoted to five forms of *inter-generational* identity: creed (religion); country (nationality); color (race); class (social and economic); and culture. In each case, these identities are typically handed down from parents of both cis-genders to children of both cis-genders through biological and social reproduction. Even if race is, as Appiah points out, a social construction, one's racial identity is inherited by one's biological parents. Although cabbies, and fellow academics, commonly identify me as African American, once I tell them my parents are from India, they quickly change their ascription and assign me to the South Asian category. The question "what are you?" is "correctly" answered as South Asian, even if this socially constructed category is not some brute, biological fact. Similarly, a black African child adopted and raised by white parents will still, in most contexts in North America, be ascribed as black. But whereas racial identity depends on inter-generational, biological transmission, other identities are transferred through forms of social reproduction, such as family upbringing, inherited financial and social resources, formal and informal education, and legal categorization (e.g., citizenship). Albeit not always as directly as with race, all five forms of inter-generational identity are bequeathed from one generation to the next, typically from parents to children but also from broader network of elders to youth.

In a brilliant move, Appiah probes these inter-generational identities by drawing on theoretical insights from the study of

35

gender, a non-inter-generational identity. Although gender norms are transmitted between generations, gender itself is not inter-generational, since a cis-gender woman might bear only cis-gender sons, with whom she will never share a gender identity. So while socially constructed black biological parents will beget a socially constructed black child, a socially constructed female gendered mother need not beget only socially constructed female gendered children. Appiah's reasons for using gender theory to probe creed, color, country, class, and culture stem not from the juxtaposition between identities that are and are not inter-generational. Rather, he does so to show that even a supposedly natural division between male and female sex identities are not so biologically clear. For instance, because some individual fetuses have androgen insensitivity syndrome, they do not develop male genitalia, despite the presence of a Y chromosome. Conversely, some fetuses have two X chromosomes, but nevertheless develop male genitalia via the mother's androgens. The sexual binary between male and female develops within a variety of inter-generational communities because statistically, the overwhelming majority of fetuses develop with male genitalia derived from an XY chromosomal pair or female genitalia derived from an XX chromosomal pair, but this rule is regularly, if infrequently violated as part of the natural, biological train of events (*ibid.*, 12-20). Given that sex is not discrete and binary, unsurprisingly gender is neither, and Appiah provides succinct but insightful discussions of gender fluidity, intersectionality, and essentialism.

Appiah's point is to use sex and gender to undermine essentialism, which psychologist Susan Gelman defines as "the view that certain categories have an underlying reality or true nature that one cannot observe directly, but gives the object its reality" (*ibid.*, 26). While essentialism is factually false, it remains

psychologically compelling, given human mental survival mechanisms, with the result that most children are essentialists by the time they are six years of age. The challenge is to fight against our tendencies towards essentialism, which Appiah tries to help us do through his substantive chapters. As mentioned above, I have no philosophical problem with Appiah's use of gender to probe creed, country, color, class, or culture. My concerns lie more with the practical effect of this intellectually compelling exercise. Appiah is certainly correct that we must discard the 19th century science of essentialism in favor of the best intellectual tools of the 21st century. But doing so is no guarantee that it will heal the social and political problems surrounding identity conflict, and part of the reason stems from the disjuncture between those identities that are inter-generational, like race, religion, or class, and those that are not, like gender or sexuality.

Importantly, inter-generational identities can facilitate forms of violence that are profoundly different than is the case with other identities. Of course gender-based violence is unfortunately all too common, but I at least cannot recall protracted gender-based wars. Conversely, civil or inter-state wars based on race, religion, nationality, and class are not hard to identify. And even if we reject the dystopian predictions of Samuel Huntington, we can think of violent clashes of civilizations if we define culture not in Matthew Arnold's refined sense but follow Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, who saw it as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits" (*ibid.*, 191). Wars between political nations and economic classes occur even without any attribution of essentialism, for a variety of economic or political reasons, and the threat of such violence is itself a cause of the same.

The inapplicability of the anti-essentialist, gender-theory approach to inter-generational conflict is clearest in the chapter on religion. Appiah's anti-essentialism teaches us to reject "scriptural determinism," which defines religion through reference to select doctrinal texts (*ibid.*, 44), and instead asks us to see religions as doctrinally plural communities whose tenets are open to contestation. This approach is particularly helpful in challenging religious fundamentalist oppression based on gender or sexual orientation (*ibid.*, 56-61). But when Appiah turns to a discussion of inter-religious violence, his comments ring hollow. For instance, he mentions that sometimes a group will be more prone to violence if it is closer doctrinally to a society's major religious group, citing the case of the Ahmadis of Pakistan who suffer violence at the hands of other Muslims, who in turn largely leave Christians alone (*ibid.*, 42). His point seems to be that scriptural determinism leads Pakistani Muslims to fear doctrinal impurity among supposed co-religionists more than the full-fledged infidelity of Christians. Leaving aside instances of anti-Christian violence in Pakistan, I question the generalizability of this claim. For instance, in neighboring India, the Hindu majority regularly terrorizes the doctrinally distant Muslim minority but ignores the doctrinally similar Jain community. In the United States, meanwhile, anti-Jewish violence, while real and currently resurgent, has historically remained below the levels reached in Europe. According to the historian Hasia Diner, this stemmed from three factors contingent to the United States: the prevalence of the black-white racial division, which coded Jews as white; the constitutional embrace of religious pluralism and disestablishmentarianism; and the social approval of capitalism, with which Jews were associated (Diner 2006). Without trying to propound a full theory of religious conflict, my point is that the presence or absence of religious conflict often has nothing to do

with doctrine and more to do with whether a particular group is perceived as a threat to the political or economic interests of other groups.

While doctrinal essentialism need not drive most conflict between religious groups, so too racial essentialism need not drive racial conflict. Over the years, the number of white Americans who believe that racial identity is primarily biological has steadily declined, so that now only a small minority holds such a view. However, that does not mean that racial conflict is over in America. Instead, a "new racism" ascribes negative traits to blacks, for instance, due to purported cultural deficiencies. Furthermore, racial animus proves to be remarkably sensitive to political context. For instance, a recent study shows that working-class white Americans chose to support a black candidate, Barack Obama, when they perceived his economic positions to favor their class interests over those espoused by Mitt Romney, a white candidate. But many of these same whites favored Donald Trump over Hilary Clinton because he foregrounded racial threats to white dominance while simultaneously assuaging some of their economic concerns related to international trade. Not economic anxiety *per se* but rather "racialized economics," in which whites perceived their economic interests to be opposed to those of black and Latinx populations, drove the behavior observed among pivotal Obama-Trump voters.[1]

Appiah does briefly consider how inter-group conflict can arise independently of any deep-seated essentialism when he discussed the "Four-Day-Old Tribe," an experiment in which boys were divided into two groups in a remote rural area. Once aware of the other group, the boys proceeded to ascribe not only labels but also

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[1] Cf. Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018, 175-179.

character traits to themselves and to the other group. According to Appiah, "Labels came first, but essences followed fast" (Appiah 2018, 30). But here he is talking about stereotypes, not the purportedly scientific essences that grounded 19th century racial science, or biological claims about female inferiority, or even a scripture-based understanding of religious identity. Groups can form over fairly superficial traits, but they fight when they perceive the other group as a threat to their bodily or economic security.

This insight, I think, reveals weaknesses in Appiah's treatment of national identity in the chapter titled "Country." Here, his target is the Romantic notion of essential national identities based on language, culture, and character. After revealing the linguistically, religiously, and culturally diverse composition of any nation, and after rightfully rejecting the historical solutions of annihilating, expelling or assimilating those who do not fit the national mold (*ibid.*, 80), Appiah concludes: "People have long known in America what many in Europe have come to grasp – that we can hang together without a common religion or even delusions of common ancestry" (*ibid.*, 103). True enough. But while Appiah points out the obvious flaws in claims about discrete nations, he does not do much to interrogate the philosophical problems posed by discrete *states*. Indeed, Appiah suggests that the solution to the problems of nationalism is to remember that "What binds citizens together is a commitment…to sharing the life of a modern state, united by its institutions, procedures, and precepts" (*ibid.*, 103).

It is true that numerous difficulties emerge in trying to define the borders of a nation, whereas it is not so hard to define the borders of states. The questions are *whether* state borders are justifiable, and if so, *which* ones. Although he concludes this chapter with a section titled "Democratic Difficulties," which includes a brief mention of the problem of secession, he does not confront

the thorny "democratic boundary problem," which holds that the outcome of a democratic vote may depend on where the boundaries of the demos are placed.[2] So if Catalonia holds a referendum to secede from Spain, what happens if a majority of residents of the entire region vote for secession, while a majority of those within the sub-section of Barcelona vote to remain? Does Barcelona get to remain part of Spain, or is the operative boundary that which encompasses all of Catalonia. The same problem can confront Brexit, given that most of Scotland voted to remain within the EU. Looking more broadly, thinkers like Robert Goodin and Arash Abizadeh have questioned the democratic legitimacy of all nation-state borders, given that these were not legitimated through a global democratic process.[3] Again, I have no problem with Appiah's treatment of nations and nationalism. I too find them constructed. However, given the historical record of wars between states, even those that affirmed internal diversity like the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires, we cannot go too far in seeing the state as the solution to nationalist conflict. And given the ongoing injustice of global inequality between rich and poor states, we cannot ignore the problem that states, and their exclusive claims, pose for another of Appiah's normative commitments, that of ethical cosmopolitanism.

Inter-state war again reminds us of how threats to bodily and economic security can generate inter-group conflict, even absent essentialist notions of race, religion, or nation. Interestingly enough, Appiah's inattention to the problem of inter-group threat undermines some of his insights into the one identity that is putatively not essentialist, that of class. Many people think that class identity is fluid, not fixed, and that modern societies facilitate

[2] Cf. Whelan 1983.
[3] Cf. Abizadeh 2008 and Goodin 2007.

individual social mobility across different classes. Appiah correctly shows how class identity is actually much more rigid. According to his analysis, class is a complex form of multi-dimensional stratification, based on the distribution of three types of capital: financial (resources, such as money); social (connections to other people with resources); and cultural (habits and behavioral markers that grant one respect or honor). The result is Michael Savage's model of social stratification, with seven classes: an elite that enjoys a surfeit of all three forms of capital, an underclass deprived of all three, and five intermediate classes with differing levels of each (Appiah 2018, 165-6). Appiah's solution is to try to break up monopolies on capital in favor of a plural redistribution, such that one can still gain financial capital without needing social or cultural capital, or vice versa.

Unlike the other chapters, Appiah's prescriptions here are much more tangible and could easily inform policy debates. But what he lacks is a political model, one that addresses one source of class rigidity: the threat that certain classes perceive as coming from other classes. For instance, one of the greatest problems to class justice is the fact that middle classes perceive greater threats from the redistributive demands of classes beneath them rather than perceiving greater opportunities from making their own redistributive demands on the classes above them. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously put is in *The Discourse on Inequality*: "Citizens let themselves be oppressed only so far as they are swept up by blind ambition and, looking below more than above themselves, come to hold Dominion dearer than independence, and consent to bear chains so that they might impose chains in turn" (Rousseau 1997, 183). *Amour propre*, or comparative esteem, not essentialist categorization *per se*, makes people perceive threats where they should instead perceive allies.

Rousseau did not find easy solutions to the problem of *amour proper*, and nor do I. But I do contend that a greater appreciation of the role of comparative threat perceptions in the generation of inter-group conflict would have rendered Appiah's brilliant book all that much more valuable. Appiah is certainly right to challenge all forms of essentialism. But the failure to probe other psychological sources of identity conflict limit the practical efficacy of his noble enterprise.

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