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978-1-107-02765-7 - The Politics and Ethics of Identity: In Search of Ourselves

Richard Ned Lebow

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THE POLITICS AND ETHICS OF IDENTITY

We are multiple, fragmented, and changing selves who, nevertheless, believe we have unique and consistent identities. What accounts for this illusion? Why has the problem of identity become so central in post-war scholarship, fiction, and the media? Following Hegel, Richard Ned Lebow contends that the defining psychological feature of modernity is the tension between our reflexive and social selves. To address this problem Westerners have developed four generic strategies of identity construction that are associated with four distinct political orientations. Lebow develops his arguments through comparative analysis of ancient and modern literary, philosophical, religious, and musical texts. He asks how we might come to terms with the fragmented and illusionary nature of our identities and explores some political and ethical implications of doing so.

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To Carol, whose support through this and earlier projects has been so
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P R E F A C E

Over the years I have occasionally taught an undergraduate seminar on identity. In the first session I ask my students if they are unique and they all respond affirmatively. I have them list the qualities that make them this way and, for the most part, they write down the same constellation of qualities: intelligence, creativity, feelings for others, sense of humor. When I read their replies aloud they are confused, but quickly come up with a new line of argument: their life experiences make them unique. They readily concede that these experiences are mediated by memory, and are surprisingly confident about its accuracy. They are initially resistant to research that reveals just how labile and socially constructed memory is.

The contrast between popular and scientific conceptions of identity is by no means limited to my Dartmouth and LSE students. It is widespread in Western societies, where it is propagated by prominent scholars and, in a more troubling way, by therapists who urge patients to discover their “inner selves.” The enduring belief in unique and consistent identities suggests that there are strong psychological and practical needs to understand ourselves this way. This question encouraged me to inquire further into the problem. I read the literature on identity in philosophy, psychology and political science and discovered that scholars tend to err in the opposite direction. Some philosophers deny any selfhood to people, and represent us as cognitively complex animals who live in the present and whose reflexivity is best described as stream of consciousness. Philosophers and social scientists who advance thicker conceptions of self overwhelmingly emphasize its social determinants and tend to downplay human agency.

I enter this debate, but obliquely. My central question is why identity has become so important to people in the modern era. I argue that the intellectual and material changes associated with what has come to be known as modernity intensified the conflict between our reflexive and social selves. Four generic strategies of identity arose, each intended to overcome or reduce the inner tensions generated by this conflict. Each of these strategies is associated with, and might be said to provide the psychological underpinnings of, four modern political orientations. These are conservatism, totalitarianism, liberalism and anarchism. I analyze the relationships between modernity and identity and identity and politics and assess the feasibility of different identity strategies. I ask if we could dispense with illusion of unitary, consistent identities, how we might do this and explore its ethical potential.

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I found this book harder to research and write than any other I have published. The first reason for this has to do with the breadth of the subject; identity is an important field of study in almost every social science and humanities discipline. It is treated differently by these disciplines, and most of them ask different questions about it. The biggest division is between studies that are interested in finding out what identity is, or what people think it is, and studies intent on fathoming its behavioral and other consequences. Many of the latter treat identity as an unproblematic category, which it certainly is not. The concept of identity is as fuzzy as any in the scholarly arsenal, and more troubling still, is almost inseparable from political projects that are largely negative in their ethical implications. Stepping outside these frameworks is difficult, as it requires a new vocabulary, and one that makes it correspondingly more difficult to assimilate and integrate ideas and findings from different studies.

In the course of approaching a rich and dispersed set of primary and secondary sources I read a fascinating article in the “Science Times” about slime molds. These single cell creatures sometimes combine by the thousands into multicellular organisms that can send out tendrils several meters in search of food and then reconstitute themselves into shapes that can move toward food sources by the most efficient routes.¹ I did something similar. I sent out intellectual tendrils in different disciplinary directions, and discovered rich lodes of thought about identity. I reconstituted my project in response to what I found, and did so on multiple occasions. I differ from slime molds in that there was nothing efficient about the manner in which I explored and constructed. It was downright messy, and the problem of multiple reframings produced a manuscript with more loose ends than I liked. Feedback from readers, my own and those selected by the Press, provided useful criticisms and served as the catalyst for additional rounds of revisions.

My book still incorporates tensions, and necessarily so. In the first instance, they are attributable to the troubled relationship between the concept and practice of identity. I am studying personhood and identity, categories to which I concede no ontological standing. Phenomenological selves are nevertheless of prime importance in understanding human motives and behavior. It is not easy, and hardly intellectually seamless, to tack back and forth between the two. I use a set of golden age, utopian and dystopic texts to study identity and the forms it has taken in the modern era. Each of these texts provides important insights into the general questions that drive my inquiry, and each has something interesting to say about identity discourses and practices in a particular culture and era. This dual focus inevitably compelled me to make difficult trade-offs within individual chapters between the micro and macro level of analysis.

¹ Carl Zimmer, “Can Answers to Evolution Be Found in Slime?,” *New York Times*, “Science Times,” 4 October 2011, pp. 1, 4.

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I wrote this book while I was James O. Freedman Presidential Professor of Government at Dartmouth College, Centennial Professor of International Relations at The London School of Economics and Political Science and Visiting Scholar at Pembroke College, Cambridge. I made good use of the Dartmouth Library, the British Library and that of the American Academy in Rome. I am indebted to my colleagues at Dartmouth, the LSE and Cambridge for numerous interesting and helpful conversations, and to the John Sloan Dickey Center at Dartmouth, and its administrator, Christiane Wohlforth, for arranging a seminar to critique my concluding chapter. Thanks, too, to Roger Giner-Sorolla at the psychology department of the University of Kent for arranging a lecture to his colleagues and graduate students, to Bertrand Badie for doing the same at the "Sciences Po," to Rick Herrmann and Craig Jenkins for inviting me to speak at the Mershon Center at Ohio State and to Mike Williams and his Oxford colleagues for the invitation to give the Rothermere lecture at "the other place."