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Ethnic and National Identity: The Conceptual Critique

Introduction

Identity is not something tangible or visible: you cannot touch, smell, taste or see it. Yet many claim that its presence is so prevalent today that nearly everything has become a matter of identity. Television, radio and newspapers bombard us on everyday basis with information on how 'the very identities of numerous cultures or ethnic groups are threatened'. We hear over and over again, explicitly or covertly, how our national identity has to be preserved either from the 'the floods of immigrants' or polluting influences of culturally or morally inferior Others: the West, the Imperialists, the Muslim fundamentalists, the Americans, the uncivilised barbarians, the EU bureaucrats, the terrorists, the Asians, the Africans, and so on. Romanticist writers and organic intellectuals demand that we discover and respond to our cultural identities. Advertising seduces us daily with consumerist messages that sell us distinct status identities. As numerous studies and publications demonstrate 'identity' has become a dominant idiom in popular, activist, and contemporary academic discourse. This near absolute dominance can best be illustrated by the simple fact that Google search lists over 93 million sites linked to the key word 'identity'.¹

This concept has not only acquired almost universal acceptance, it has also become a normative strait jacket. Today, a person is expected and required to have an identity. Even though there is profound popular disagreement on whether identities are essential or existential, primordial or constructed, singular or multiple there is almost no dispute over the question of whether identities exist or not. It is assumed that 'an identity' constitutes an indispensable ingredient of every human being so that making the claim of not having or wanting an identity might be regarded

at best as bizarre and at worst as suspicious, immoral or sinister. For the keepers of today's moral order being identity-impaired might be perceived socially as more problematic than being mentally or physically impaired.

In this and Chapter 2 I intend to question this unproblematic use of the concept of 'identity', and in particular 'ethnic and national identity'. I argue that the vague and porous nature of these concepts creates profound methodological problems in the study of human life. I also look briefly at the historical and geographical underpinnings of these concepts to evaluate their analytical utility. Finally I sketch some possible sociological reasons as to why these concepts have acquired such a hegemonic position today and I briefly explore the political implications of their use. While Chapter 2 provides detail scrutiny of operational and methodological problems, the focus here is on the conceptual and theoretical issues.

The idea of identity

Social scientists in general and sociologists in particular are renowned for their inexhaustible appetite for analogies, metaphors and images, seeking the means to capture the 'essence' of social reality in a single word. In order to interpret and explain the nature of social change, the individual and group behaviour or the outcome of unpredictable social events, social scientists are very often eager to look for meaningful and generalisable categories outside of their respective disciplines. Sometimes these concepts are found in art (i.e. Lyotard's 'post-modern'), literature (Goffman's dramaturgical sociology of 'frames', 'performances', or 'theatre'), theology (Weber's 'charismatic authority') or architecture (Mumford's necropolis). However the most resonant categories of generalisability are found in natural or technical sciences (with examples ranging from Durkheim's mechanical and organic solidarity to Parsons's equilibrium to Castells' network society or Beck's risk society). The concept of 'identity', and hence its derivative, ethnic and national identities, also have their origins outside the social sciences – more precisely in mathematics, logics and analytical philosophy. This mathematical term has entered sociological discourse via neo-Freudian psychoanalysis, psychology and psychiatry.

Despite some pronounced differences mathematical, logical and philosophical understandings of 'identity' are similar in the sense that they all operate with a formal strict and precise concept. In modern logic and set theory identity refers to a symmetrical, transitive, relation. It is

the 'two-place predicate' (=) that holds only between a thing and itself (i.e. for all x and y , ' $x = y$ ' holds true if x is y) (Copi, 1979: 140–9). Analytical philosophy operates with two standard concepts of identity – qualitative and numerical identity. While qualitative identity relates to arbitrary objects that are duplicates, exactly similar in all respects (i.e. two blue navy shirts produced in the same military factory on the same day), numerical identity refers to object's irreplaceable uniqueness (i.e. despite the different clothes they wear, Spiderman and Peter Parker are only one person). Derek Parfit (1995: 14) illustrates this distinction in the following terms:

I may believe that, after my marriage, I shall be a different person. But that does not make marriage death. However much I change, I shall still be alive if there will be someone living who will be me. Similarly, if I was teletransported [to Mars], my Replica on Mars would be qualitatively identical to me; but, on the sceptic's view, he wouldn't be me. I shall have ceased to exist.

Finally, in mathematics identity refers to several things – in algebra identity is an element in a set of numbers that when combined with another number in an operation leaves that number unchanged (i.e. $b + 0 = b$). It also has more specific meanings such as 'an equality that remains true regardless of the values of any variables that appear within it' or 'a function f from a set S to itself' (i.e. $f(x) = x$ for all x in S) (Cori and Lascar, 2000: 31–4). Goddard (1998) has recently summarised all these mathematico-logical understandings of identity as something that basically refers simultaneously² to two distinct forms of difference: absolute, zero difference, and relative, non-zero difference. Absolute definition of identity relates to 'the unconditional nature of a thing that is not derived from external relation – the product of internal self-similarity', while relative definition of identity implies 'the conditional nature of a thing, n , derived from the difference between n and not (n) – the product of external other-difference'. The example of zero difference is logical statement 'he must be Peter since he is the same as Peter' whereas the example of non-zero difference is 'Peter is best since he earned more than the others'.

Since its incorporation into the discourse of social science the concept 'identity' preserved its dualistic mathematico-logical meaning. Having an 'identity' meant being on the hand identical (or in less extreme versions, similar) to a group/category and on the other hand it also meant being different from another group/category (Peter = Peter, Peter \neq Nancy).

For example a working-class identity simultaneously implied that individuals who share this form of identity have a more or less identical class position (e.g. being manual workers, dependent on similar wages, living in the similar housing estates, having the same educational qualifications, sharing the same cultural values etc.) and at the same time that this group differs from the other classes (e.g. middle or upper classes) and their respective identities.

However, this dual application of the concept in social science was paradoxical from the very beginning. While mathematics, logics and analytical philosophy can operate with an absolute, rigid and total concept (e.g. absolute zero) which cannot be reduced further to anything else ($3 = 3$), sociology and the social sciences do not have such a privilege. On the contrary, events and actors in the social world are, as most social scientists now agree, highly dynamic, flexible, constantly changing, fuzzy, unpredictable and in the continuous process of creating unintended consequences of their action (Boudon, 1982). As Harris (1995: 47–50) rightly argues identity is a formalist category and formal models are ill suited to deal with the complexities and fluctuations of social reality. Identity as conceptualised in mathematics, logics and analytical philosophy relates to questions of equivalence and substitution. 'Experimentalists have no problem with substitutivity in formal systems, but their main interest in such systems lies in their ability to illuminate the structure of the material world'. While formalist models are highly appealing for their precision, clarity and certainty, in social research their use is extremely limited. In other words, since there is no absolute zero difference in the world of humans applying formalist concepts here seems rather futile. However this was no obstacle to the dramatic proliferation of identity discourse in social science and the humanities. As Gleason (1983) points out, the concept of identity was introduced into this field of study only in the late 1950s and 1960s, primarily through the work of the psychologist Erik Erikson. Although there were almost no references to 'identity' in social science dictionaries and encyclopaedias before the 1950s, since then this concept has attained almost indisputable recognition. Such an overextensive use of the term also creates a cacophonous confusion with many mutually competing understandings of 'identity'.

The concepts of 'Identity'

Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 6–8) have recently tried to bring some order to this conceptual cacophony by identifying five dominant ways in which the concept of identity is currently used in social science and the

humanities: (a) identities as non-instrumental forms of social action; (b) identities as a collective phenomena of group sameness; (c) identities as deep and foundational forms of selfhood; (d) identities as interactive, processual, contingent products of social action; and (e) identities as fluctuating, unstable and fragmented modes of the 'self'. They argue that these five understandings of identity range from 'strong' to 'weak' uses of the concept – while the first two conceptions operate with the common-sense, 'hard' uses of the term, the remaining three, which are often found in the social constructivist approaches (particularly in cultural studies, anthropology and sociology) work with very 'soft', flexible and contingent understandings of identity. However, despite pronounced differences, all of these understandings of identity have a firm footing in their mathematico-logical and philosophical origins. Hence, whereas the use of identity as 'non-instrumental forms of social action' and 'interactive, processual, contingent products of social action' refer in our mathematico-logical classification to relative non-zero difference, the 'collective phenomenon of group sameness', 'deep and foundational forms of selfhood' and fluctuating and fragmented modes of the 'self' refer in a literal or metaphoric sense to absolute zero difference.

Relating identity to social and political action means defining a group or category from the outside. In mathematical terms the conditional nature of a thing, n is derived from the external relation which in this case is social action. The authors who operate with the concept of identity in this tradition define identity in firm opposition to self-interests or alternatively as a ground for possible social action. The idea is that the actions of individuals and groups are not determined only by their instrumental rationality but also by shared cultural values reflected in common cultural or political identities. In contemporary sociology of ethnicity and nationalism one can find numerous examples of this form of identity use.

A typical example is a relatively recent debate on 'national identity, citizenship and multicultural society' between J. Rex and G. Delanty (1996). While the authors express profound disagreement on whether interests or identities are at the core of 'new nationalism' in Europe, they both share the understanding that identities are something opposed to interests. So for example, Rex speaks how

Delanty also seems to want to argue that the banal nationalism of the masses is now no longer about the pursuit of interests as, I think, was the case with classes, but is now primarily concerned with identity ... therefore [they] become concerned above all to achieve identity.

They will surely still have interests which they pursue and which affect the structure of their organizations. (Rex, 1996: 1.5)

And Furthermore 'Whether we are talking about interests or identity, however, we should be clear that the "banal" interpretation of the immigrants' role may be challenged' (Rex, 1996: 1.8). In addition, Delanty also operates with the concept of identity as a base for social action arguing that 'identity' not 'ideology' is a key motive of social action. So we can read that

Nationalism no longer appeals to ideology but to identity. ... this of course does not mean that ideology has come to an end, but that it has fragmented into a politics of identity: ideology is being refracted through identity. (Delanty, 1996: 2.3)

There are three crucial problems with this form of 'identity' use. First, there is no obvious reason why all forms of non-instrumental motivation and action should be categorised as being based on 'identity'. As we could learn from Weber (1968) and others social action can originate from a variety of motives: those that are predominantly rational (instrumental or value rational), traditional, habitual, emotional and so on. The use of the term 'identity' here is extremely counterproductive because by not differentiating between all these different forms of action it explains very little. Instead of pinpointing the exact type of motive or action taking place and thus providing an explanation, it obscures the entire explanatory process by simply conjuring up the word 'identity', like pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

Second, there is no self-evident reason why any form of social action should be characterised as having basis in 'identity'. One can straightforwardly explain a variety of forms of social and political action with the use of less ambiguous concepts and without making any reference to 'identity'. If we look at our previous example of 'new nationalisms' in Europe one can develop a similar argument to Delanty's without invoking the concept of identity at all. So one could argue that nationalism no longer appeals to ideology but to sociologically or psychologically less troubling categories, such as group membership, self-understanding, self- or group-perception, sense of commonality, shared values, emotions, or status hierarchy.

Third, there is no empirical evidence that it is 'identity' that motivates individuals to form groups. If identity is understood as a form of value driven action than one has little reliable empirical tools to measure the

intensity of values. As Hechter (1995: 56) argues on the basis of his empirical work 'values can not readily be imputed from behaviour ... usually we do not know if such behaviours result from the fear of sanctions (...), or directly from deeply held value commitments. Since both mechanisms produce the same outcome, it is impossible to tell which of them is responsible in the usual case'.

The uses of identity in relation to 'group sameness', 'foundational forms of selfhood' and as 'fluctuating modes of the self' mean defining a group or category from the inside out. The strategy used here is a literal or metaphoric understanding of identity in reference to its unconditional nature which is not derived from an external relation. This is most clearly visible in the work of authors who operate with the strong concepts of group membership and thus write about 'gender', 'cultural', 'ethnic', 'national' and other identities. For example H. Isaacs and A. Smith operate with very strong and definite concepts of cultural, ethnic and national identity. While Isaacs's conceptual framework incorporates the relation to 'group sameness' and 'foundational forms of selfhood', Smith's theory works with all three understandings of identity ('group sameness', 'foundational forms of selfhood' and as 'fluctuating modes of the self') as an absolute zero difference. Isaacs's concept of 'basic group identity' represents the most straightforward case of understanding identity as an absolute zero difference. According to Isaacs (1975: 29–30, italics mine): 'this is the identity derived from belonging to what is generally and loosely called an "ethnic group". It is composed of what has been called "primordial affinities and attachments". It is the identity made up of *what a person is born with or acquires at birth.*' Even though A. Smith uses more subtle concepts his terminology is still firmly rooted in understanding identity as an absolute zero difference. In clear reference to 'group sameness' and 'foundational forms of selfhood' he writes how 'the *attempt to create new communities and cultural identities* is likely to prove painfully slow and arduous, especially where the *new identities lack clear boundaries* and must compete with *well established and deep rooted identities* and communities' (Smith, 1999: 19, italics mine); or how 'identities are forged out of shared experiences, memories and myths in relation to those of other collective identities' (Smith 1999: 247). Furthermore he defines nationalism as 'an ideological movement for *attaining and maintaining identity*, unity and autonomy of a social group some of whose members deem it to constitute an actual or potential nation' (Smith, 1999: 18, italics mine). Smith finally incorporates the third understanding of identity ('fluctuating modes of the self') by making a distinction between individual identities which are seen as changeable,

situational and optional, and collective identities (e.g. ethnic, religious and national identities) which 'tend to be pervasive and persistent' (Smith, 1999: 230).

This form of identity use is even more problematic than the previous one. First, the concept is reified to the extreme. Both Smith and Isaacs operate with the idea of identity as something tangible, visible or touchable. As we could read in their works identities, as with other material things, have 'clear boundaries', they are 'acquired' and 'well routed', should be 'attained and maintained' and so on. Identities are truly perceived as things. They are seen as something firm, stable and given and not as a product of social action, contingent events, or human agency. In this way a concept (of 'identity') acquires attributes and property that only the material world can have – boundaries, action or will. This view is not only analytically problematic but it can also have serious practical implications when used within the realm of popular discourse for the political mobilisation of groups or individuals (as demonstrated in Chapter 9). Hence, people are incited to kill or die in order to 'preserve, maintain or acquire their identities'.

Second, by using the concept of identity in reference to 'group sameness' and 'foundational forms of selfhood' in such a reified way we are unable to provide an explanation of individual or group behaviour. Instead on focusing on what our job is, to explain why individuals reify their group membership and perceive other groups and categories as homogenous things with single wills, we engage in the creation, maintaining or reproduction of the reified view of the social world. As Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 5) following Bourdieu (1990) rightly point out, academics who take on this type of reasoning do not distinguish between the categories of practice ('lay', 'folk', 'native' concepts) and the categories of analysis. If the social actors in their every day life operate with the terms such as 'identity', 'ethnic identity' or 'national identity' as something self-evident and unproblematic this does not mean that a researcher should treat these categories in the same manner.

Third, even when researchers such as Smith (1999: 230) occasionally acknowledge that some forms of 'identity' are contingent, situational and instrumental (as typical in 'fluctuating modes of the self'), there is no self-evident rationale as to why, or justification of how, the concept of identity is necessary to explain individual's and group's multiple and fragmented perceptions and understandings of 'selves'. What some theorists and researches do here is invoke 'identity' to explain 'modernity', 'post-modernity' and other grand abstract concepts. Thus, one (reified) metaphor is used as a shortcut to explain the other (grand) abstraction.

This strategy leads to a very soft understanding of the concept which produces extreme vagueness and as such is empirically of very little value. If the concept of 'identity' is used theoretically to mean anything and everything (as in some works from post-structuralism and cultural studies) then it empirically means nothing.

To recap, neither one of the two original theoretical models (relative non-zero difference and absolute zero difference) and five conceptual approaches derived from them ('non-instrumental forms of social action', 'interactive and contingent products of social action', 'collective phenomenon of group sameness', 'deep and foundational forms of selfhood' and 'fluctuating and fragmented modes of the "self"') to the study of identity has much analytical or heuristic legitimacy. On the one hand the concept is not indispensable nor necessary while on the other hand it is either vague and all-inclusive or reified and excessively inflexible.

'Identity' in space and time

The formalist conceptual origins of 'identity' have profound analytical implications for its use in social science. Despite the astonishing variety of uses to which 'identity' is put in contemporary sociology and beyond, this remains, as some researchers have recently started realising, a theoretically thin and unarticulated concept. As Bendle (2002: 1–4) rightly argues and documents it well on his analysis of Castells's and Giddens's theories, the leading accounts of identity are 'radically under-theorised and incapable of bearing the analytical load that the contemporary situation requires'. Instead of often invoked journalistic clichés such as 'identity crisis', what one encounters here is a conceptual crisis in sociology where sociological analyses are 'profoundly weakened by an excessive and uncritical reliance on what has become a politicised, residual and under-theorised concept'. A simple and crude assimilation of a formalist, and hence analytically intransigent concept, in many ways alien to sociology has created the environment where some sociological answers to contemporary problems differ little from popular common sense comprehension: 'it is all about identity crisis'. The contemporary resurgence of so-called identity politics is a good indicator of such an essentialist misuse of this concept where 'one's hidden injury becomes the ground for a claim of valued identity' (Rose, 1999: 268). In more extreme circumstances this form of reasoning leads to situations such as those of mass extermination in Rwanda and Bosnia (see Chapter 9) where as Helen Hintjens (2001) puts it 'identity becomes a knife'.

The recent and unprecedented popularity of this concept hides its historical novelty and geographical exclusivity. Despite some authoritative claims to the contrary (i.e. Jenkins, 2004) 'identity' as well as its derivatives 'ethnic and national identity' have very specific and narrow spatial and temporal origins. As many anthropological studies show (e.g. Daniel, 1984, Roland, 1988, Ewing, 1990, Douglas, 1992) the concept of identity is largely a European and Western creation. Concepts such as 'self', 'personality', 'character' or 'person' carry a set of fairly distinct meanings and images in different social worlds. In many non-Western contexts human collectivities are not conceptualised as presuming a bounded sense of social or individual agency. Unlike the Western or European concept of identity which is profoundly individualist and visualises collective behaviour in an individual, conscious, purposeful way, many non-Europeans operate with a very different understanding of collective and individual action. Handler (1994: 31–3) gives examples of North American Indians whose conception of personhood is not confined to bounded and tangible self. Instead Ojibwa Indians perceive supernatural creatures, animals and even stones as being equivalent to human personality. No entity is conceived as finite and material, and a bear and a stone alike can transform into a human beings and vice versa. For this worldview the idea of personal or group demarcated identity may seem equally strange and bizarre as it may look incomprehensible and of no use. Similarly for Hopi Indians human thoughts are not located and enclosed within the confines of one's head but are rather visualised as floating openly in the outside world, on an equal footing not only with the thoughts and images of other creatures, but also the real creatures themselves: 'A Hopi would naturally suppose that his thought (or he himself) traffics with the ... corn plant ... that he is thinking about' (Handler, 1994: 31). Douglas (1992: 82–3) reports how Tellensi and many other West Africans conceive individuals as inborn multiple personalities 'whose component parts act like separate persons. One part of the personality speaks the life-course of the individual before he is born'. Geertz's (1973) example of the irrelevance of personal names in Bali where 'persons orient themselves to a divine and unchanging cosmic realm in which the details of an individual's unique personality have no importance' (Handler, 1994: 33) just confirms the geographical specificity of 'identity'. Many non-European social milieus operate with a concept of self that has very little in common with their modern European counterparts where 'identity' is conceptually located in a linear vision of time with the strong sense of continuity and progression and within concrete material boundaries.

In addition to its spatial exclusivity 'identity' has also very recent and thus limited temporal foundations. As Handler (1994), Baumeister (1986) and Bauman (1996, 2004) show 'identity' is largely an invention of the modern age. The decline of the feudal order, intensive industrialisation, urbanisation, decline of religious authority and a parallel erosion of political legitimacy couched in terms of the divine origins of rulers have all had a decisive impact on the discovery of self. Modernity has diminished traditional social structure and its stable logic of differentiation and continuity. As Bendle (2002: 16) argues 'factors that underpinned a sense of continuity (geography, community, employment, class, etc.) were destabilised; whilst those that provided a sense of differentiation (ancestry, social rank, gender, moral virtue, religion, etc.) were delegitimised'. Hence 'identity' was born when traditional communal ties started to weaken, when old hierarchies started to collapse and when the sense of individuality was re-discovered as something valuable but also dynamic, mobile and creative. Industrial capitalism and secularisation have helped redirect attention away from the medieval obsession with an after-life to self-actualisation and the accomplishments of individual goals in earthly settings. Analysing Jane Austen's novels Handler and Seagal (1990, 1994) shows how understandings of social relations and a logic of individuality differ starkly in distinct historical epochs: there is no sense of 'identity' in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England since this is 'a world in which individuality is complexly balanced with non-individualistic social forms of rank and patriarchal family' (Handler, 1994: 36). 'Identity' is a historical product of modernity which discovered the depths, potentials and ingenuity of the human self created on the ruins of the traditional order.

The fact that the origins of 'identity' are predominantly modern and Western tells us a great deal about the concept's wrongly assumed 'normality', its analytical fragility, and ultimately its dispensability. However it does not tell us much about the reasons for its near universal and worldwide popularity today. Further investigation is required: Why is this global appeal of 'identity' regularly articulated in ethno-national terms?

Ethnicity + nation + identity = ethnic and national identity?

This brief genealogy of 'identity' suggests a novel and in many respects unprecedented break in direction concerning the obsession with individual autonomy which characterised the birth of (European) modernity.

However despite its Enlightenment inspired preoccupation with the development and articulation of individuality, a unique sense of personhood or self-actualisation, the post-Enlightenment discourses of identity have for the most part acquired collectivist overtones. Instead of the individual 'discovery of the self', or psychological sense of personality, 'identity' has become associated with cultural, thus inevitably group-centric, difference. As clearly recognised now (i.e. Yack, 1996, Hall, 2002) it was not only a Romanticist backlash that was responsible for this articulation and later institutionalisation of cultural difference in uncompromising collectivist and exclusivist terms, the Enlightenment bears as much responsibility, since civic forms of group association were often as rigid. In other words despite its initial focus on individual autonomy and self-affirmation, the post-Enlightenment era gave birth to a variety of group centric discourses of identity. Among these diverse discourses associated with the representation of cultural difference two concepts stand out in terms of their influence on academic as well as public life – ethnic and national identity.

The common sense notions of 'ethnic and national identity' which are also widespread among some academics imply that ethnicity + identity = ethnic identity and nation + identity = national identity. In other words, all three concepts are seen as largely unproblematic and the simple mechanical addition of one to the other allows us to speak of and research 'ethnic or national identities'. Sometimes the distinction is made between ethnicity and ethnic identity or nation and national identity (i.e. Liebkind, 1989, Smith, 1999) but most often these concepts are used interchangeably (i.e. Cameron, 1999, Edensor, 2002, Kumar, 2003). However this is a deeply flawed strategy since, as with the concept of 'identity', so do the concepts of 'ethnicity' and 'nation' carry a lot of problematic baggage. Adding one profoundly problematic concept to another just as problematic idiom can only create more misunderstanding and confusion and prevent the pursuit of sober research. Similarly, treating them all as synonyms brings even more analytical turmoil. Before accounting for the difficulties of applying arduous constructions such as 'ethnic or national identity' (see Chapter 2) let us briefly explore the conceptual meanings of ethnicity and nation.

There is no need to look in great details at the etymological roots of these two concepts as this has been done on numerous occasions (Guibernau, 1996, Malešević, 2004, Smith, 2004). What is essential here is that despite their ancient origins in the Greek and Latin worlds and their sporadic use in the past, both concepts are, as with 'identity', fairly modern acquiring their contemporary meanings in the last two hundred

(nation) or fifty years (ethnicity). They are also both, again as with 'identity', associated with a particular form of cultural difference and all three, as used in their contemporary parlance, are undoubtedly Western creations. Finally, despite their supposed straightforwardness and unproblematic use these two concepts, as with identity, have acquired multiple sets of meanings. As Uzelac (1999, 2006) and Fenton (2003) document there are dozens and dozens of (often mutually exclusive definitions) of nations and ethnicity. They range from objectivist to subjectivist (Renan), from cultural to political, from essentialist to existentialist from agency-centred to structure-centred. Outside academia, in popular and bureaucratic discourses there is also great variety of uses which are often dependent on geographical location, particular social context or historical contingencies (Hroch and Maleckova, 2001).

Thus, in the English speaking world nation and nationality are often used as synonyms for state or nominal citizenship, while in Central and Eastern Europe these terms imply symbolic or real link with ethnic ancestry. Thus what makes one British or French is the possession of a British or French passport and a degree of loyalty to their respective states whereas to be German or Croat one also requires at least one German or Croat grandmother. This situation is similar for ethnicity: the North American public regularly uses 'ethnicity' as a synonym for cultural minority with no salient physical group difference, where Italian or Polish Americans were defined as 'ethnic groups' while African Americans or Amerasians were denoted as 'racial groups'. Due to a very different historical heritage the European audience is more inclined to adopt ethnicity as a substitute for nationhood which is articulated in terms of a presumed commonality in shared territory or descent: what makes one Albanian is not determined by the place of her birth, be that Kosovo, Albania or Sweden, but by her ethnic origins, and living as Welsh or Scot in England does not make one necessarily an ethnic minority.

The problem with most definitions of ethnicity and nation and consequently with ethnic and national identity is their static view of something which is in fact an extremely dynamic set of relationships. Typical definitions of these two concepts list a set of required attributes that a social group has to possess in order to be deemed 'an ethnic group' or 'nation'. For example Bulmer (2001: 69–70) defines an ethnic group as 'a collectivity within larger society which has real or imagined common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus upon one or more common elements which distinguish the members of the group from other members of the society ... [and these]

include: area of origin, language, religion, nationality, kinship patterns, physical appearance such as skin colour'. In a similar inflexible way Smith (2003a: 24–5) defines a nation as 'a named human population occupying an historic territory and sharing common myths and memories, a public culture, and common laws and customs for all members'. Both of these definitions operate with what Wolf (1982: 6) and after him Carrithers (1992) call a 'billiard ball view of social groups', that is they posit human collectivities as either-or fixed and overly structured entities with stable and almost unchangeable features. Does this mean that if a number of individuals who do not believe in common ancestry or memories of a shared past or do not actively participate in public culture, break common laws and do not observe common customs are by default cast outside of the particular ethnic group or nation? If this is so how come that in times of war or an 'ethnic' conflict one regularly encounters new leaders of ethnic groups and nations many of whom prior to the conflict were indifferent to law and custom, with little knowledge or interest in common myths and memories or public culture. For example the siege of Sarajevo in early 1990s reversed all social hierarchies with well-known street gangsters and criminals with no link with any ethnic or national movements and with no previous interest in ethnic politics, such as Jusuf Prazina-Juka, Musan Topalović-Caco and Ramiz Delalić-Ćelo, transformed overnight into national heroes and popular symbols of ethno-national resistance (Selimbegović, 2000).

Furthermore, do these definitions imply that if members of a group suddenly lose or change some of these attributes that the nation or an ethnic group has stopped being such a group? For example imagine a hypothetical case where a great majority of members of a particular nation subscribe to a myth of common descent which after successful and indisputable archaeological discovery turns out to be an absolute and incontrovertible fabrication. Let's say the common shared belief is that group's origins were traditionally traced back to Tumleks and after the archaeological discovery it becomes obvious that every single Tumlek was poisoned on 4 August 366. What happens then? Would that particular social collective stop being a nation? Of course it would not. Its historians and nation builders would quickly find an adequate replacement from an unlimited repertoire of potential myths and memories which would prove as good as the Tumlek origins of their nation. It is similar with common laws and public culture: the fact that German Democratic Republic and Federal Republic of Germany had incompatible legal systems and distinct public culture did not affect the well ingrained, and nineteenth century induced, collective perceptions that

there is one single and indivisible German nation. The situation is almost identical with two Koreas.

These objectivist and objectifying definitions are extremely limited in accounting for diverse forms of cultural difference. Ethnic groups and nations are not billiard balls, they do not and could never exist on their own. They emerge as specific group labels in a particular moment of time and with a particular social and political reason. In both cases they ideologically cling on the notion of culture, whether as an anthropologically understood lived culture (culture as a distinct way of collective existence) in ethnic relations, or a socio-political understanding of high culture (culture as civilisational refinement expressed in artistic excellence) in nation-formation. What is vital here is to understand that instead of speaking of ethnic groups and nations as collective assets of a particular group and consequently about externally presumed 'ethnic and national identities' it is much more fruitful to treat these entities as categories of social practice. 'Ethnic group' and 'nation' just as 'ethnic and national identities' are not particularly useful concepts as they inevitably imply stability, rigidity and staticism which does not reflect the realities of the social world. Instead as Brubaker (1998, 2004) cogently argues it is more useful to talk about 'ethnicity without groups', or about nationness as set of contingencies, discursive frames, political projects or organisational routines. Just as ethnicity is not a group but a form of social relationship, similarly nationness is a dynamic set of historically framed processes. This is not to say that there are no objective cultural differences in the world of humans. Of course there are. It is precisely because cultural differences are so real and so vivid that they can easily become objects of ethnicisation and nationalism. For unlike cultures which are complex expressions of real human differences (i.e. distinct ways of collective existence) ethnicity is not, as Blumer and many others wrongly suggest, the expression of objective characteristics such as language, religion or origin. Similarly ethnicity is not the representation of a nebulous 'ethnic identity'. Ethnicity is, as I have argued elsewhere (Malešević, 2004), politicised social action, a process whereby elements of real, actual, lived cultural differences are politicised in the context of intensive group interaction. Ethnicity is not a synonym for cultural diversity as a great majority of our cultural practices and beliefs are rarely if ever politicised. Whereas culture is about real, lived collective difference, ethnicity is often about segments of that broad cultural repertoire which does not have to be real or lived experience. In an intensive social conflict just as in milder forms of group competition,

as Weber (1968) was well aware, any cultural trait can become politicised and hence serve as an object of group mobilisation.

For nationness this is even more so, being a peculiar and novel historical creation. Nation is not, as some analysts (i.e van den Berghe, 1981, 2005: 115) suggest simply a politicised ethnicity. Not only is such an understanding tautological given that ethnicity is already a politicised culture, but more importantly such a view does not clearly distinguish between the near universal and trans-historical processes of politicisation of collective difference at work in all ethnic relations, and the historically specific series of events and practices that characterise nation-formation. Nationness is a complete historical and profoundly contingent novelty, a complex process whereby a patch of relatively arbitrary territory becomes firmly demarcated, centrally organised and run while simultaneously growing into an indisputable source of authority and group loyalty for the great majority of those who inhabit it. Nationhood is a modern ideological construct reinforced equally by the institutions of the modern state (education system, mass media, public culture) as well as by civil society and family and kinship networks. The fact that something is ideological does not imply that is false. On the contrary as Gellner (1983) rightly points out modern human beings are sincere in their nationalist feelings. Nationalism is a powerful political ideology that although dependent on continuous institutional reinforcement does not go against the grain of public opinion. However this has little to do with some mystically ingrained 'identity' and a great deal with the socio-historical context of post-Westphalian world where not being national is scarcely an option any more. In other words, nationalism is not as Connor (2005: 40) claims 'identity and loyalty to the nation', it is the particular, historically created, ideological condition that most human beings now find themselves in. There is nothing normal or self-evident to it. It is a symptom of a particular historical epoch and an indicator of a particular direction that modernity took at the end of eighteenth century. Thus when Smith (2001b: 30) defines national identity as 'the maintenance and continuous reproduction of the patterns of values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations, and the identifications of individuals with that particular heritage and those values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions', he provides us with an almost tautological statement with little heuristic value. National identity is linked to the maintenance and reproduction of values that compose national heritage, yet it is far from clear who does the 'maintenance and reproduction' as well

as who decides what a 'heritage of nation' is. What does it mean when individuals make a claim of identifying with a particular national heritage? Such a static definition does not make obvious that there are always different individual and inter-group understandings of what and how it means to be a Serb or Norwegian; it also does not make apparent that there are different intensities of such feeling or that there are different individual or social contexts that certain feelings inspire which at the surface may all look the same. Furthermore the expressions of popular pride in national heritage can also be no more than stereotypical answers of conformity with the dominant ideological narrative that nationalism is; or a banal expression of inertia of everyday routine and habit. Such a definition tells us little about the real depth of such individual or collective sentiment (about the relationship between cognitive, affective and conative rationale behind this view); or it can be just an expression of plain instrumentalism. Most of all such understanding of 'national identity' is overly inward looking and too psychological as it presumes that expressions of particular views and feelings are uncontaminated by the workings of state institutions, civil society movements and influences of other forms of social structure.

Therefore as with 'identity', 'ethnicity' and 'nation' contain a multiplicity of meanings. The plasticity and ambiguity of the concepts allows for deep misunderstandings as well as political misuses. However, unlike 'identity' ethnicity and nation have also acquired legislative and institutional underpinnings through formulations such as 'ethnic minority', 'ethnic group', 'nationhood' or 'nationality' which have had even more destructive effects. Institutionalised and bureaucratized definitions of the situation such as the idea that a particular individual legally belongs to an 'ethnic minority' or one 'ethnic group' or nation, for instance as formulated in census, passports and other state and inter-state and UN documents, not only reifies group and individual relations which are always dynamic, but it also becomes a form of oppression by caging individuals into involuntary associations. In such a situation cultural difference which is by definition mobile, flexible and hazy is arrested and codified, thus preventing social change. Hence most popular and legislative understandings of ethnicity and nation are severely problematic since they operate with unsociological views of cultural difference perceiving it from the inside out. It is assumed, as Bulmer's definition testifies, that social groups possess different cultural characteristics which make them unique and distinct (common language, life style, descent, religion or physical markers). In such a perspective culture is perceived as

something relatively or firmly stable, persistent and definite. Cultural difference is viewed in terms of a group's property (e.g. Germans possess a distinct culture to that of Serbs). However since the publication of F. Barth's 'Ethnic Groups and Boundaries' (1969) and more recently Brubaker's vigorous conceptual criticisms (1996, 1998, 2004) of the terminology used in this field, social science is adopting radically different concepts of ethnicity and nationness. Barth stood the traditional understanding of cultural difference on its head, that is, he defined and explained ethnicity from the outside in: it is not the 'possession' of cultural characteristics that makes social groups distinct but rather the social interaction with other groups that makes that difference possible, visible and socially meaningful. Brubaker (2004: 3) has expanded this view even further by attacking the clichéd constructivism which dominates the analyses of cultural difference where one finds 'constructivist and groupist language casually conjoined' and where some academics are ridden by tension of maintaining their scholarly cool headedness while simultaneously shifting to essentialist foundationalism that political mobilisation requires. It is almost impossible to uphold this 'dual orientation of many academic identitarians as both analysts and protagonists of identity politics' (Brubaker, 2004: 33).

Therefore, popular and legislative understandings of ethnicity which are unfortunately shared by some academics in their attempt to research 'ethnic and national identities' have little analytical value. When ethnicity is understood in a reflexive way as a meeting point of social action rather than in terms of hard cultural contents, then the contrived construction 'ethnic identity' makes very little sense. Similarly when nationness is conceptualised as a set of historically articulated and still ongoing process of ideological construction instead of some presumably fixed and everlasting attachments to symbols of national heritage then there is no need for 'national identity'. A claim to possessing 'ethnic or national identity' is by definition an essentialist claim which aims to simultaneously reify all three categories – 'identity', 'ethnicity' and 'nation'. This problem is perhaps most discernible in attempts to operationalise and apply the concepts of 'ethnic and national identity' in empirical research which will be analysed in the next chapter. However before that an explanation is required to address the question: Why have problematic concepts such as identity, together with its derivatives, ethnic and national identity, acquired an almost unquestioned popularity? Though Brubaker (2004) provides us with a powerful criticism of identitarianism in practice he does not tell us much about the sociological reasons for such popularity.

Why such popularity?

Although, as argued in this chapter, the concepts of ethnic and national identity appear to be theoretically and conceptually deficient one cannot dispute their astonishing popularity within and outside of academia. Although the concept of identity gained prominence from the 1960s, it was really in the late 1980s and through the 1990s to the beginning of this century that 'identity' acquired an almost hegemonic position in both academic and popular discourse. While mass media and scholarly journals and books made very sporadic references to 'identity' or 'ethnic identity' in the 1940s and 1950s, today it is impossible to skim through articles, news bulletins or books on cultural or political difference without noticing hundreds and often thousands of references to 'identity'. Although, as demonstrated above, there was a sociological call for 'identity' as early as the nineteenth century, the recognition of such a concept had to wait until the end of the twentieth century for 'identity' to become a dominant concept in both popular and academic discourse. This fact in itself begs a question: Why has such clearly ambiguous concept become so dominant in popular and academic discourse at this time?

There are probably many sociological and historical reasons why the concept of identity has acquired such a dominant position. However, I will focus here only on one which I consider to be the most important. The astonishing popularity of the concept comes primarily from the fact that 'identity' has historically and ideologically filled the role that the three other major social concepts have vacated – the concepts of 'race' 'national character' and 'social consciousness'.

The master ideological concept used to make sense of human difference and similarity from the late eighteenth until the first half of the twentieth century was the concept of 'race'. Charles Linne's was the first use of the concept in an academic and rigorous way to produce the following (at the time influential) typology of human races: (1) Americans – reddish, obstinate, and regulated by custom; (2) Europeans – white, gentle, and governed by law; (3) Asians – sallow, severe, and ruled by opinion; and (4) Africans – black, crafty, and governed by caprice (Wolf, 1994: 4). What Linne started, in his use of quasi-biological concepts to define, select and order human difference, the social science of the nineteenth and early twentieth century developed to perfection. As Banton (1983: 35–50) explains the use of the concept 'race' has shifted from the initial emphasis on descent to taxonomic and eventually explanatory level: it was very much the responsibility of scientific

discourse that race became conceived as a stable, permanent, definite and unchangeable biological and cultural entity. De Gobineau, Lubbock, Morton, Knox and other 'scientific racists' perceived races as different species (in a zoological sense) and had a belief that a 'person's outward appearance was an indicator of his place in a natural order'. Darwin's theory of evolution only strengthened the authority of 'a scientific concept of race', while social Darwinism co-opted the concept for the social sciences and more general use. Banton (1983: 52) and Dickens (2000) document how the concepts of race and racial inequality were dominating public discourse of the nineteenth and early twentieth century and how very few if any intellectuals were immune to belief in the superiority of their ('white') race. The general belief was that one should 'preserve racial hygiene', races had to be 'maintained' and their purity 'attained', it was seen as legitimate to 'fight for one's race' or to 'awaken racial consciousness'. It was only the military defeat of the Nazi state and its racist ideology that has largely delegitimised academic and consequently popular concepts of race. Although the term has survived the Second World War and is still used it has lost most of the scientific and popular appeal it had before the Second World War. Post-Nuremberg world had to look for and adopt another social concept that would deal with cultural and physical difference and would at the same time dissociate their users from any resemblance to the Nazi project.

In the 1950s and 1960s there was no clear winner to replace 'race' – whereas the European and left-leaning intellectuals and after them journalists, and the general public in the Eastern (but also in Western) Europe, switched to the new ideological master concept of 'social consciousness', centre and right wing intellectuals as well as the general public in America opted for the ideological master concept of 'national character'.

Just as 'race' these two concepts provided enough elasticity to cover many distinct processes and forms of cultural, political or physical difference. The Hegelian/Marxist inspired idea of 'social consciousness' gained prominence together with the discourse of class politics. While racial unity and racial consciousness were now seen as dangerous concepts, proletarian unity and class consciousness were not only accepted but also considered highly desirable ideas throughout the communist and many parts of non-communist Europe. Following Marx it was regularly argued that classes can fully exist only when they develop 'full class consciousness' (class 'fuer sich' as opposed to class 'an sich'). Class consciousness and workers unity had to be 'awakened', 'attained' and 'maintained'. One had to fight using revolutionary means to

'preserve and acquire' social consciousness. Class consciousness was also regarded as superior to 'national consciousness'. Marcuse (1964) and other Frankfurt School theorists believed that capitalism and mass culture produce 'false needs' and false, or in Marcuse's terms 'unhappy consciousness', and that proletariat and other disadvantaged groups have to liberate themselves to discover their 'true consciousness'.

Similarly, following the influential culture-and-personality school of anthropology (M. Mead, R. Benedict) the concept of 'national character' has largely replaced race in a quasi-biological sense in America in the 1960s. As Gleason (1983: 24) emphasises

the new era of scientifically respectable study of national character was inaugurated in WW II by a group of scholars who were called upon by agencies of the United States government to apply their skills to such questions as how civilian morale could best be maintained or what kind of propaganda could be most effectively employed against the enemy.

The term caught on in the public eye and academics, politicians and journalists embraced phrases such as 'national character has to be preserved', that nations strongly differ in terms of their 'characters', McCarthy's Committee on Non-American Activities revealed how 'communism is not part of an American national character', one had again 'to fight for the true national character', and prove ones worth by being 'a part of American national character', and so on.

Although fairly different the ideological master concepts of 'social consciousness' and 'national character' had a great deal in common. They were both vague and inclusive enough to accommodate many distinct processes, events or social actors and as such quickly secured popularity. They both answered the need of the Cold War politics to present a unified front to the enemy by perceiving its citizens as closely bound by singular and clearly recognisable will – 'we all maybe different individuals but we all share an American/British/French national character' or 'Soviet class consciousness is above petty individual differences'. As such these concepts were both also deeply collectivist, analytically inflexible and strongly prone to reification. Hence, whereas the master concept of 'race' was now abandoned in form (rejecting only the term) it fully persisted in its content, meaning and function – as 'character' or 'consciousness'.

With the emergence of youth, ethnic, gender and other radical politics in the late 1960s and 1970s in the West and Gorbachev's policies of

openness in the East in the mid-1980s the domination of 'the national character' and 'social consciousness' has started to erode. The new social movements could not easily fit into the old Cold War concepts of class and nation-state. 'Identity' politics was slowly taking over. The absolute collapse of communist ideology and the break-up of supranational federal states in Eastern Europe has ultimately delegitimised the notions of class consciousness in the East and of stable and predictable national character in the West. 'Identity' emerged as a new and an all-inclusive ideological master concept to simultaneously define and 'explain' the current situation of dramatic social change. The popularity of this master concept has come exactly from its ambiguity and ability to accommodate different processes, structures, actions and events. 'Identity' provided an illusion that dramatic social change was under control: we know what is happening – 'only people are fighting to preserve, awake, maintain etc. their identities'. Identity has thus emerged as a grand umbrella term to contain all the unexplained and constantly emerging phenomena of our times in a single word. 'Identity' transpired as a simple universal answer to all unanswered complexities and problems of contemporary social life.

As with 'race', 'national character' or 'social consciousness', 'identity' possesses elasticity and aloofness, quickly making sense of difference and similarity. 'Identity' and its derivatives, ethnic and national identity, have today become a legitimate political tool in the academic and popular discourse just as 'race' was at the end of nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century and as 'national character' and 'social consciousness' were during the Cold War. This time again the form ('national character/social consciousness') has been sacrificed to the content. One communitarian, reifying, stultifying concept has just been replaced with another similar one.

Furthermore, the vagueness and aloofness of this ideological master concept corresponds even more with the times than the previous three master concepts. 'Identity' is a fuzzy term for fuzzy times. The speed and intensity of social and political change has prevented development of more analytical, more precise or empirically useful concepts. In the post-modern spirit of these times every social problem is easily and quickly labelled and 'explained' as an identity problem, and since it is now commonly acknowledged (at least in academia) that identities are fluid, complex, multiple and dynamic, then no full explanation of this or that social problem is possible. 'Identity' is a tautology for our times.

However, what is important to emphasise here is that just as 'race', 'national character', or 'social consciousness', 'identity' is not an innocent

concept. Exactly as 'race' was uncritically borrowed from biology where the theory of evolution was crudely applied to the world of humans to justify political goals – colonialism or Nazi expansion, and 'national character' and 'social consciousness' were borrowed from medicine (psychiatry in particular) and used to delegitimise ideological (class or national) enemies, so was 'identity' appropriated from mathematics and logics to serve ideological goals. These goals may now be multiple – to acquire political autonomy or an independent state for an ethnic group ('to maintain cultural identity'), to gain the power or to uphold the political status quo in the state ('to attain or keep democratic political identity'), to win the public or media support against the asylum seekers ('to preserve national identity') and so on, but the reason for this appropriation remains as before, political. Individuals and groups are still politically mobilised to fight for, to die or to kill for the preservation and defence of their 'identities' just as they were for the protection of racial hygiene or class unity.

Conclusion

Most general studies of identity emphasise that identity implies sameness and difference at the same time. So, for example, Jenkins (1996: 3–4) argues that 'the notion of identity simultaneously establishes two possible relations of comparison between persons and things: similarity, on the one hand, and difference, on the other'. And indeed this is exactly what the original mathematical and logical meaning of the terms is all about. However, as argued in this chapter, the definitional simplicity and seductive crispness of the concept as developed in analytical philosophy, logics and mathematics is, for better or worse, unachievable in social sciences. Both attempts to transfer the concept, either in its original mathematical way or in a more popular metaphoric manner, have proved futile. The term 'identity' (as well as its derivatives 'ethnic' or 'national identity') covers too much ground to be analytically useful. Instead of theoretical and methodological clarity the concept has brought upon us more confusion and opened up a door for possible manipulation. Its conceptual ambiguity prevents clear and transparent operationalisation which, as we will see in Chapter 2, has profound methodological implications, whereas its methodological aloofness leads to analytical paralysis. And finally its quasi-scientific use through popular appeal has a potential for devastating political outcomes. The enormous popularity of this concept is to be located in its ability to summarise the state of unbridled self in an age of high modernity. This

summary of self with all its ambiguities and uncertainties provides an imaginary sense of control and direction in a world 'gone mad'.

'Identity' is no more than a common name for many different and distinct processes that need to be explained. Wrapping all these diverse forms of action, events, actors under a single expression can only generate more misunderstanding and will not help us in any way to explain the extraordinary social change that has been taking place in a last few decades. 'Identity' is an ill-suited concept for such a giant task.