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Culture and the Study of Social Identity

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Abstract
By declaring the social to be universal and timeless the formalised study of social identity – drawn mostly from sociology, social policy, social psychology, and cultural studies – ignores the fact that as a discrete domain the social has a definite a history. This paper argues, first, that modern social identity depends on the existence of the social as a separate domain of relative peace and freedom which emerged in early modern Europe – the civil-peace social. The paper then goes on to its main argument, that culture – as patterns of enculturation, or the formation of particular personae – can, by providing a distinction between culture and the social, help to clarify the way social identity actually works. In this way, the study of social identity needs to put more stress on the fact that for the civil-peace social to have emerged and to continue to flourish, the culture that produced unrestrained individuals and groups had (and still has) to be overcome in favour of the culture that produced (and continues to produce) more restrained persons as new moral personae.

Introduction
Sometime between the first (1996) and second (2004) editions of his influential text, Social Identity, Richard Jenkins had a eureka moment – the word ‘social’, he decided, does no significant work in the term ‘social identity’:

While this second edition retains the book’s original title – marketing considerations will have their say – I prefer now, wherever possible, simply
to talk about “identity”. If my argument in this book is correct, all human identities are by definition social identities. Identifying ourselves or others is a matter of meaning, and meaning always involves interaction ... To add the “social” in this context is therefore somewhat redundant (Jenkins 2004: 4).

Is he right? Is the word ‘social’ so dispensable? I think he’s right that there is a problem with the way the field conceives of ‘the social’, but wrong about the nature of that problem. The problem is not that the social is superfluous, it is that the field assumes that the ‘social’ component of ‘social identity’ is universal and timeless because it reflects the universal and timeless ‘natural’ capacity of humans to reason towards ‘natural’ moral ends. In other words, the word ‘social’ is doing for Jenkins what it does so often in supposedly dedicated ‘socio’ disciplines. By declaring the social to be universal and timeless these disciplines ignore the need to treat the social as a discrete domain that has a definite history. Only in this way can Jenkins get away with claiming that the universality and timelessness of this domain mean that the word ‘social’ can be ditched.

An alternative account of the social – the politico-legal account – pointedly rejects the idea that the social is a universal and timeless domain. Where the reason-morality account has its roots in the Christianised Aristotelian understanding of the perfectibility of human beings, the politico-legal picture of humans is much bleaker, being grounded in the understanding of sociality promoted by Epicurean and Stoic thinkers. By this understanding humans are dangerous creatures in need of great discipline. They have just enough reason to allow them to see that they need strong rule, but because their will far outweighs their reason, they certainly do not have enough to rule themselves by reason alone (see esp. Hunter 2001: 171-172). However important these roots may be, the politico-legal account of the social owes its greatest debt to the work of a number of early modern thinkers faced with the mayhem of religion-inspired civil wars, especially, Hobbes in England, dealing with the English Civil War and its aftermath, and Pufendorf and Thomasius in Germany, dealing with the Thirty Years War and its aftermath (see

For the politico-legal account, the social is a separate domain of relative safety and freedom for the majority of the population, and in this sense it is quite an achievement. It was first won, in the face of the aforementioned civil strife, in a very limited number of countries – initially in England, France, Germany, and the Netherlands, though of course it has since spread to many other parts of the world. The type of safety and freedom involved can be defined straightforwardly as that which allows individuals to pursue their own goals with statistically little chance (compared to other eras or to other places) of their being physically harmed by other individuals as they do so. In line with this I should add that the terms ‘safety’ and ‘freedom’ are used here in a historical manner. I am not suggesting that some universal and timeless standards of safety and freedom are possible. In this way, consideration should be given, for instance, to the careful way in which Pufendorf refused the idea that freedom is a natural right accompanying humans’ reason and instead allowed it to have an empirical status only as a product of subjects’ (or citizens’) recognition of a superior, a superior charged with creating and enforcing social peace (see esp. Hunter 2003; for historical accounts of other types of freedom, see also Pocock 1975; 1987; Skinner 1998).

As a separate domain, the social was forged by the tense relation that developed between politics and law, a relation that soon included the state, as a product of the tension, particularly around the notion of sovereignty. For this account, morality is not natural at all but is made up of a series of historical conventions, only some of which are conducive to the peaceful interaction of individuals and groups. For this account, the more dangerous side of morality – by which humans are divided into warring factions in line with competing visions of the ‘true’ moral life – had to be contained. This is where culture proved so important to the formation of social identity, in the sense of an
identity necessary for civil peace. The culture of strongly willful and only partially-reasoning personae was overcome in favour of the culture that produced more restrained personae.

I have been promoting the politico-legal account as a serious rival to the reason-morality behemoth in various places over the past few years (Wickham 2006a; 2006b; 2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2008c; 2008d; 2010; Wickham and Evers 2010; Wickham and Freemantle 2008), but this is not my main goal here. Instead I wish to focus on the crucial role of culture in the formation of social identity. I shall divide what follows into two sections. In the first I shall sketch some approaches to social identity from within the four main disciplines that comprise the bulk of the social identity literature (sociology, social policy, social psychology, and cultural studies). My aim here will be to show the way they rely on the reason-morality account of the social. In the second section I shall show how a very particular definition of culture – as patterns of enculturation, or the formation of particular personae – can, by providing a distinction between culture and the social, help to clarify the way social identity actually works.

**Some problems with approaches to social identity within the field’s four main disciplines**

While the ‘identity’ component of the term is most often pluralized in the literature, and thereby allowed to come in many shapes and sizes – Jenkins’ introductory shortlist of different types of social identity includes: youth identity, financial status identity, official national identity (such as that enforced by passports), race identity, old-age identity, sexuality identity, gender identity, and religion identity (Jenkins 2004: 1-3) – the social remains the same timeless and universal combination of reason and morality it has supposedly always been.

In Taylor and Spencer’s edited collection, *Social Identities: Multidisciplinary Approaches* (2004), essays are offered on many different types of identity – class identity, gender identity, sexuality identity, race identity, English character, European character, pagan identity, media identity, ethic identity, music identity, and even cyber
identity. The focus, however, remains entirely on identity, not a word is uttered on social and no means are offered to help the reader understand why these types of identity are social. The adjective ‘social’ is left undisturbed as the guardian of the reason-morality status quo.

Of course the Jenkins text and that of Taylor and Spencer are both from the sociology/social policy end of the literature. But this turns out to make little difference. The situation is the same, albeit with interesting twists, when we turn to texts from social psychology and cultural studies. Stephen Worchel and his co-editors provide a good guide to what social psychology has to offer in their *Social Identity: International Perspectives* (1998). Worchel et al. situate their effort generally within the philosophical tradition founded on the Socratic/Platonic exhortation to ‘Know Thyself’, but more particularly within the much more recent social psychology tradition concerned to build and test theories, in the hypothetico-deductive sense of the term (Worchel et al. 1998: xvii-xviii). They locate three groupings of such theories at work within their discipline, one exploring how humans perceive others, a second exploring how humans perceive themselves, and a third, with which they are most interested, which seeks to extend the range of the other two to include such factors as ‘influence, group polarization, collective behaviour, the impact of minorities, prejudice, stereotypes and leadership’ (Worchel et al. 1998: xviii). They are remarkably upfront about their commitment to the driving themes of the reason-morality approach – the universality and timelessness of human reason and morality: ‘the social identity framework provides a common language that eclipses geographical, political and cultural borders’ (Worchel et al. 1998: xix).

The story is the same in other social psychology texts that deal with social identity. Theories, as hypotheses constructed on the basis of the results of previous experiments and observations, are offered about particular behavioural characteristics (prejudice, etc.), existing in particular places at particular times, and then tested through experiment to determine the extent to which the characteristics studied do indeed ‘eclipse geographical, political and cultural borders’, and so pass muster as types of reason-
morality social identity (see, for example, Abrams and Hogg 1990; Capozza and Brown 2000; Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje 1999; each one has the term ‘social identity’ in its title).

Probably the most significant text from the discipline of cultural studies is *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (1996). It tackles the object ‘cultural identity’ by drawing on a variety of philosophical, theoretical, and political positions, most of which are captured in Hall’s introductory essay (Hall 1996). Hall takes cultural identity to include philosophical elements (provided to Hall in this case mostly by Derrida), psychoanalytic elements (Freud), political elements (Laclau), ideological elements (Althusser), historical elements (Foucault), and feminist elements (Butler). But one thing his essay does not do is to specify what is cultural about cultural identity and how it is different from social identity. The book, with the exception of the Foucaultian contribution of Nikolas Rose (1996), is not concerned to mark a special ground for either culture or the social. The editors and the authors involved seem content to have the social and culture work alongside one another in affirming the timelessness and universality of reason and morality as the guiding forces of human existence (though it is worth noting that in later work du Gay has moved well away from this position, to one much closer to the one I am advocating here; see esp. du Gay 2007).

The existing social identity literature, then, does not come close to drawing the firm distinction between the social and culture that I think is needed for the ‘social’ in ‘social identity’ to have the force it should have.

**Culture as a vital component of the study of social identity**

In seeking to further develop in this section the argument that, as modern social identity depends on the existence of the civil-peace social, as a separate domain of relative peace and freedom, the study of social identity needs to put more stress on the fact that for the civil-peace social to have emerged and to continue to flourish, the culture that produced unrestrained individuals and groups had (and still has) to be overcome in favour of the culture that produced (and continues to produce) more restrained persons as new moral
personae. All I have room to do here is to provide some illustrations of each of these two types of culture as they produce these two types of personae (the illustrations are drawn from Wickham and Evers 2010).

As an illustration of the type of culture that had to be overcome consider Norman Cohn’s account of the operation of a culture of shocking violence in Western Europe between 1096 to 1146, when Pope Urban II was raising armies for his Crusades. The economic conditions of the poor were extremely harsh, except for a few good seasons when high agricultural yields coincided with a shortage of labour. Cohn describes grinding poverty and hunger and a desperation to seek deliverance to a better existence via an apocalyptic transformation. In this setting the poor were very receptive to the charisma of itinerant figures claiming to be the resurrected Christ, or Charlemagne, or Frederick, or some other such leader. More than this, or rather as an extension of it, the poor were extremely bloodthirsty. Cohn’s picture of the actual conduct of the types of personae formed by this culture, as the crusaders journeyed across Europe towards the Holy Land (Cohn 1970: 61-88) suggests that the level of restraint that is so vital to the operation of the modern civil-peace social was barely present in the poor army, if it was present at all. They were like a giant mob, following various charismatic leaders and, especially, their own lust for blood (the charismatic leaders usually leading the way in this, too, which was part and parcel of their charisma). Especially pertinent in this regard is Cohn’s account of the conviction by members of this poor army that they would not be as ready as God wished them to be to slaughter Muslims in the Holy Land if they did not kill as many Jews as possible as they trekked across Europe; as such, they actively sought out and destroyed the Jewish population of each town they passed (Cohn 1970: 74-80).

As one illustration of the type of culture that produced the personae necessary for the rise and maintenance of the civil-peace social, consider the achievement of the sixteenth century Dutch reformer, Justus Lipsius, mentioned in the introduction. He sought to teach people how to do more than just survive when cast into a sea of deadly violence. The Dutch revolt against Spain in the middle of the sixteenth century was a religious war of particular savagery. Witnessing it, Lipsius became convinced that the ancient Greek
philosophy of Plato and Aristotle was useless. He turned instead to the more practical works of some Roman stoics, particularly Seneca and Epictetus, which he used to build a secular political ethics for his country’s civil servants, merchants, and military officers (Oestreich 1982: 5-9, 14-15, 31). Of great interest to my project is his triad of conceptual categories, constantia, patientia, and firmitas (constancy, patience, and firmness), well captured in his best known book, De Constantia, first published in 1584 (Lipsius 2005). This book is offered as dialogue between the author, fleeing the religious violence destroying his home town of Louvain, and a wise friend, well schooled in the Stoic doctrines. The friend allows the character Lipsius to put forth his proposed course of action and corrects his errors of thinking at every turn, instructing him in how to use his limited reasoning capacity towards the goal of constancy and patience (such that he will become less of a slave to his own emotions). The firmness adds the steel, to make up what Lipsius, the author, proposed as the ideal person for a better country: one ‘who acts according to reason, is answerable to himself, controls his emotions, and is ready to fight’. This ‘neo-Stoic man of constancy was … his contribution to the Dutch achievement of producing personnel for military, juridical and administrative offices, men equipped to set aside their religious beliefs in order to perform official functions for the State’ (Saunders 1997: 87).

As another such illustration, consider the work of Christian Thomasius (also mentioned earlier). Thomasius, too, relied on a triad of conceptual categories. Where Lipsius had used constantia, patientia, and firmitas, Thomasius used honestum, decorum, and justum. There is a considerable degree of overlap between what the two thinkers were attempting to do, albeit in different countries and over a century apart. In forging his triad, Thomasius was especially keen ‘to insulate law and manners from the devastation that religious conscience and moral absolutes had wreaked when pursued into reality’ (Saunders 1997: 92). Of the three concepts involved, decorum is of most interest to my present concerns. ‘Decorum governed actions in accordance with norms of civility and peaceful sociability, a prudent middle way between religion and law’. In Thomasius’ hands, decorum was a step towards ‘a definite new ordering of life’ (Saunders 1997: 66). As a dedicated reformer in education, as well as in law and church-state relations,
Thomasius insisted that *decorum* form part of a practical curriculum. In setting up the new Law Faculty at Halle, the first non-confessional university in Germany, he was determined to remove theology from its dominant role, complaining that it produced lawyers who “are useful for nothing; who are a burden on themselves and others ... who trample all reason under foot and with an irrational so-called conscience torment themselves and others” (Saunders 1997: 96, quoting Thomasius).

**Conclusion**

I trust that these illustrations go at least some way, in such a short paper, towards establishing my central point about the importance of culture to the formation of types of social identity necessary for civil-peace, whereby the culture of strongly willful and only partially-reasoning personae was overcome (and must continue to be overcome) in favour of the culture that produced (and produces) more restrained personae, who allow, construct, and maintain civil peace.

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