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Social Identities

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Abstract

This paper develops a sociological perspective on the concept of *social identities*—that is relations of membership recognised as significant by members and outsiders. Social identities encompass face-to-face groups and local communities, as well as large groupings that transcend any conceivable form of direct interaction, as do ethnic groups, social classes, and nations. As collective creations, social identities help to shed light on individual behaviour as well as social outcomes, and are especially critical when analysts seek to understand the chances of collective action. A variety of actors and processes are involved in the creation and recreation of social identities, including commonalities that link up with major life interests; recognition by others, both wanted and unwanted; social conflict with outgroups; initiating entrepreneurs and continuous organisational support; links to socialisation and upbringing; the systematic cultivation of ritual and symbols; and the temporal order of all these processes. Conceptualised this way, social identities crucially link cultural patterns of allegiance and solidarity (as well as of discrimination and rejection) to the actions and dispositions of individuals, groups and organisations and to macro-background conditions such as comprehensive cultural patterns, social inequality, and overarching institutions.

Keywords:

Social identities, Institutions, Organisations, Collective action, Culture, Social inequality

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Introduction

This paper develops ideas about 'social identities' as a critical theoretical frame to unpack the complex nexus between institutions, organisations and the subjective dimension of action. Social identities are relations of membership recognised as significant by members and outsiders. They are constituted through processes of self-identification and external categorisation (Barth 1969; Jenkins 1997). Social identities carry awareness and a sense of loyalty; they are affectively charged and engender emotional commitment; and they entail both obligations to and claims on other members. As such, social identities may or may not crystallise into strong attachments to a particular, bounded entity, whether an ethnic group, a class or a nation.

Social identities matter in important ways. They shape collective and individual self-understandings and constitute a source of meaning (Giddens 1991). They pattern the experience and the public representation of groups, movements and organisations (Castells 1997; Tilly 1996). They challenge and reinforce social categories. They define rights and obligations. They create social solidarities, in particular solidarities that transcend direct interaction. They reproduce social boundaries. And at such boundaries they may activate the ingroup-outgroup mechanism, turning people on either side into friend or foe.

As a consequence of these and other effects, social identities are closely related to the chances of collective action. The meaning of social identities and the strength of identification with them define the propensity of 'groupness' or sense of belonging (Brubaker 2002), and shape the chances of mobilising them into movements and organisations.

Social identities have long been of central interest to social and organisational psychology. Research within this disciplinary perspective has primarily focused on the continuities and disjunctures between personal and group behaviour by studying small groups in experimental settings (see Haslam 2004; Tajfel 1982; Turner et al. 1987). This literature yields impressive insights into the role of social identities in shaping group behaviour (e.g., decision making, productive collaboration) and shared cognitions (e.g., leadership commitment, consensus), and the construction of social identities in intragroup interaction. Yet, it does not fully explore the implications of broader institutional factors and social conflict for identity formation, and the impact of social identities on collective action. Similarly, economists have recently been drawn to include social identities into the analysis of economic transactions (see Akerlof and Kranton 2000; Austen-Smith and Fryer 2005; Constant and Zimmermann 2008). The models developed in this literature are usually well attuned to explaining identity-based behaviour, yet this approach remains wanting when it comes to analytically unpacking the complex and often conflictual processes of self-identification and external ascription.

There is also a rich literature on particular social identities, their constitution in social conflict, and their role in collective action. Students of social provision have shown that distinct welfare state regimes had major ramifications for gender identities in everyday life, and shaped the power resources and framings employed by women's movements (e.g., Huber and Stephens 2001; Orloff 1996). Scholarship on race relations has explored how distinct trajectories of nation-state formation (e.g., Marx 1998; Wimmer 2002) and different modes of colonial economic organisation (e.g., Winant 2001) instigated distinct meanings and experiences of race in the post-colonial world; and these works have looked at the consequences of those different racial identities for the organisation and goals of anti-racist movements. Focusing on social identities helps to bridge these distinct literatures and develop a theoretical frame that cuts across gender, race and class to approach the interplay of collective framings and sentiments of belonging with issues of power and organisation.

Conceptualisations

In their broadest sense, social identities encompass face-to-face groups and local communities, as well as large groupings that transcend any conceivable form of direct interaction, as do ethnic groups, social classes, and nations. A narrower version of the concept, which is the primary concern in this paper, includes only groupings that go beyond direct relational connectedness. Broadening a felicitous formulation of Benedict Anderson (1991, we can call all such social identities that transcend face-to-face interaction *imagined communities*. The peculiarity of imagined communities is their capacity to engender powerful imageries and feelings of communality even in the relative absence of direct networks and relational ties.

Social identities need to be distinguished from *roles*—sets of norms that are defined and structured by the larger institutional and organisational contexts (Castells 1997; Hechter and Opp 2001). Social identities are also distinct from *social categories*—sets of people with certain characteristics that are defined and recognised by outside observers, perhaps only by the social analyst herself. Social identities must be recognised by those involved and named in the vernacular. Age and income groupings are commonly just social categories;[1] being a pensioner or an adult are roles; but when we speak of generations, age groups that have shared important experiences such as the Second World War, the Great Depression, or even just a birth date in the years of the baby

[1] Farflung interaction networks and even small face-to-face groups may be examples of social categories as well if they are not recognised as significant identities by members, significant outsiders, or both. De facto interaction patterns without such recognition are exactly analogous to sets of people in an age or income bracket that is arbitrary in their own view.

boom, we shift from social category or role to social identity.[2] Social categories and roles become social identities when they are recognised and embraced by members and others as meaningful and worthy of identification. This process can be self-initiated; but it also can be instigated from the outside, as people and organisations frequently impose categories on others, especially when these 'categorisers' are backed up by powerful material and symbolic resources.

Analysing the relationship between social categories and the formation of social identities has a distinguished pedigree in class analysis, where sets of people who are categorised by their position in the system of production, in the distribution of wealth, in rankings of power and influence, or on a scale of status and prestige are distinguished from social classes in the fuller sense, which require a developed consciousness, solidarity and perhaps organisation.[3] By comparison, the study of nationalism and ethnicity has been more prone to conflate categories and identities, and to simply assume the existence of ethnic groups and nations as reified entities (Brubaker 2002). Yet, this domain of social analysis has now also become more attuned to think of ethnicity and nationhood as constituted in a process of transforming categories into identities.

The contrast with social categories highlights that social identities are socially constructed. The meaning and experience of membership in an ethnic group, a social class or a nation congeal through complex mental and social processes of perception, interpretation and assessment. People identify and categorise self and others and thereby create and reproduce distinct ways of seeing, interpreting and judging the social world. To boot, social identities also define the very entities of which people are claimed to be members, using a variety of criteria. For instance, in relation to social inequality they may focus on status, on various aspects of economic position, or on power and influence, and they may identify narrowly circumscribed status groups, such as power elites and fragments of the working class or large inclusive groupings. At the same time, the variability of social identity construction is subject to constraints. Social identities are entwined with a specific social position. As such, they are inevitably linked to power differentials, organisational resources, and to larger structural dynamics. Social identity formation thus can never fully escape its conditions, which are reflected in the frames, habitual dispositions and subjective experiences of their members.

Social identities are in the first place cognitive maps constitutive of particular perspectives on the world (Brubaker et al. 2004). These frames and classification schemas—often engrained in the habitus of people (Bourdieu 1990) and only sometimes

[2] Mannheim (1952) presents a famous sociological treatment of generations.
[3] Dahrendorf (1959) and Wright (1985) develop varieties of Marxian conceptions of social class. The similarities and contrasts of working class formation in Britain, Germany, France and the United States are explored comparatively in Katznelson and Zolberg (1986).

self-reflectively employed (Giddens 1991)—provide a grid for making sense of lived experience. In charting the social landscape, cognitive processes of classification and labelling are often fused with evaluation and norms. Social identities not only designate particular understandings of one's self and social location, they also work through normative orientations and prescriptions. Similarly, social identities are entwined with preferences. They structure people's needs and wants by defending interests that are indicative of one's membership or by advancing preferences that are explicitly targeted against the interests of 'outsiders.'[4] Emotions play an equally central role. Social identities focus emotional needs for collective belonging and structure sentiments of proximity and distance and sensations of liking and aversion (see Scheff 1990, 1997). Thus, social identity formation fuses the subjective dimensions of action.

Attachments determine the salience, importance and commanding character of different social identities and the affinities and commonalities expressed by them. Attachments charge certain cognitions, norms, preference structures and emotions with subjective meaning and fuse them into specific reference points for social identity. Attachments crystallise into specific boundary markers. This means that attachments function as an overarching organising principle of social identities and powerfully shape the motivation of people.

It is critical to think of social identities in the plural. Different identities vary a great deal—in their origins as well as in the substance and intensity of obligations and claims they entail. That is intuitively evident if we compare membership in a kin group with membership in a local community, a political party or a nation of millions. Moreover, any individual will have a multiplicity of—actual and potential—identities. This raises complicated issues of their relative salience—of, say, being at the same time Black, a doctor, a woman, a resident of a gated community, etc.—issues that in turn have decisive consequences for the effects of any given social identity.

The inherent plurality of social identities points to the potential of identity conflicts. Individuals may be attached to contradictory worldviews and normative orientations, sustaining conflicting obligations and claims of solidarity. Tensions among different social identities are most likely to occur when one particular social identity dominates perceptions of one's place in the world across a variety of institutional and organisational contexts—and challenges other ideas of belonging and commitment. For instance, the lived experience of Kyrgyz migrants in post-communist Moscow is primarily shaped by their status as 'illegals', a social identity that stands in tension with the imagery of the city as their capital during the Soviet era, and their self-understandings and practices as workers and parents (Reeves 2008). Conflicts among social identities have real life

[4] The nexus of identity and preference formation is such that some authors see the fundamental preferences of actors as an expression of their social identity.

consequences especially when membership claims are tied to legal recognition and access to power resources.

Conditions of identity formation

It is possible to distinguish conditions favourable to social identity formation. There are first dense interaction patterns that just need a spark of recognition to initiate processes of identification. This condition was identified by Homans (1950) in the context of small group research, and gained further prominence through Tilly's (1978) idea of 'netness' in the context of social movement studies. The situation is more complicated in the case of 'imagined communities' with minimal or no direct interaction. These require multifaceted symbolic mediation. Symbols (e.g., Kertzer 1988), myths (e.g., Smith 1986), narratives (e.g., Somers 1994), and collective archetypes and stereotypes (e.g., Gutierrez 1999) are critical for engendering powerfully imagined self-understandings and feelings of belonging. In turn, these means of symbolisation have to reach far and wide. Thus, print media were important in the historic emergence of nations (Anderson 1991), while mass media, education systems, consumption conduits and family structures play a central role in the dissemination of social identities today.

The special role of symbolisation is immediately clear when we consider a list of shared characteristics commonly understood to be conducive to mutual identification. These range from common behaviour codes and shared language to a common fate—memories of the past, anticipations of the future or both—and include also common major life interests, common values and ideals, and common religion.

A distinction of long standing in the study of identity formation is the contrast between ascribed and acquired characteristics, between, for instance, family membership and occupational status. A controversy has flared up around the labelling of identities based on ascribed characteristics as 'primordial', which is often understood as quasi-natural. It is indeed misleading to see some identities as 'natural' while others are culturally determined (Geertz 1963). Yet, rather than dismiss the whole distinction, an alternative strategy is to ask under what conditions social identities are perceived and experienced as primordial elements of collective life (see Eisenstadt 1998). For instance, it makes sense to take account of the consequences of how early a given aspect of one's social existence is treated as relevant, the ways in which it shapes later experiences, and the degree to which it is or becomes a matter of choice. Family membership, on these criteria, clearly stands apart from occupational performance, though many acquired characteristics—be it success in education or conviction of a criminal offence—can take effect early as well and do not easily change later. The degree to which social identities are conceived of as a matter of choice also plays into collective action. The perception of identities as 'primordially' given facilitates the mobilisation of shared attachments.

While it is possible to pinpoint generic conditions favourable to identity formation, it is equally important to realise that specific preexisting social identities play a critical role. They can be extended or contracted, intensified or flattened. And they can be used as models for a variety of new identity formations. The proclamation of *fraternité*—brotherhood—as the paradigm for collective solidarity in the French Revolution is perhaps the most famous instance of the latter, providing the grid for the modern idea of nations as horizontally integrated communities that transcend class and status differences (Anderson 1991; Greenfeld 1992). Preexisting identities also affect changes in the meaning and intensity of identification as they entail collective memories of critical events, of shared glory, shared frustrations, and of past developments in ingroup–outgroup relations. This is precisely what Anthony Smith (1986; 1991) suggests when he emphasises the continuities between *ethnies*, with their specific cultural and historical attributes, and the 'myth-symbol complexes' of modern nations. Finally, the malleability of preexisting identity formations is to an important extent shaped by their particular modes of social closure (see Wimmer 2008). 'Horizontal' identities, such as local or regional affiliations, probably lend themselves more readily to recomposition and transformation, whereas 'vertical' identities, such as race and gender, are less easily reconstructed into new social identities.[5] In either way, the peculiar role of preexisting identity models makes clear that *historicity*—historical singularity and the peculiar intertwining of continuity and change—is of abiding relevance in the study of social identity formation.

Another way of looking at how identities form and change in relation to what is on offer by past developments is to view cognitive maps of the social landscape as presenting a 'repertoire' of identities. Social contexts not only classify and sort individuals into categories—such external imposition is indeed one major form of initiating identity formation (Jenkins 1997)—but they also provide a variety of identity options, historically grounded scripts and models that make certain subjective processes of identification more imaginable than others. Identity formation is both constrained and enabled by previously established cognitive maps. If social identities are unambiguously inscribed in cognitive maps so as to deny reflection, they are most persistent; the facts of social construction are then hidden.

Processes and actors

Conceiving of identity formation as a matter of social construction inevitably raises the question: who are the agents that do the constructing? A first distinction separates outsiders and insiders. Discrimination by others, be it positive or negative, plays a major

[5] Thanks to Michael Woolcock for pointing us to this distinction.

role in constituting and strengthening social identities. The centrality of this process has been highlighted in a variety of domains, including research on migration (Portes 1995), racial formation (Winant 2001), and indigenous mobilisation (Yashar 2005). The joint experience of enjoying positive recognition and of suffering negative discrimination engenders solidarity on which individuals and organisations that claim to speak in the name of the designated identity can build with interpretations, suggestions of common reactions, and proposals of norms to be adopted. If we take external categorisation and internal identification together, it is clear that conflict holds a very special place in the emergence and consolidation of social identities, creating lasting collective memories, restructuring evaluations and preferences, and mobilising emotions.[6] Manuel Castells (1997) even makes social conflict the central axis of his typological distinction between legitimising social identities and various social identity forms built for resistance (i.e., project and defensive identities).

The list of relevant actors involved in social identity formation is virtually endless. Among the more important are educational bodies, news and entertainment organizations, and religious establishments and groups. Here we focus on three kinds of actors—on the leaders of identity movements who engage in mobilising potential constituencies to embrace a particular self-understanding, on people embedded in established organisational positions who make it their business to monitor and nurture the reproduction of a given social identity, and finally on modern states that constitute particularly powerful agents of identity formation.

The work of identity ‘entrepreneurs’ is multifaceted. They define and police the boundaries of a social identity, offer reasons and incentives—symbolic and possibly material—for accepting identification, develop historical narratives, lay out visions of the future, and devise roles ensuring that whatever momentum has been created is maintained. In order to do this, they need not only political and moral authority, but also the capacity to reach a wide and dispersed audience, as well as to acquire material and symbolic resources. The foundations of this authority, the means of communication as well as the kinds and origins of resources, influence the way social identity formation proceeds. For instance in late 19th century Mexico, local intellectuals (i.e., notables, low-level administrative officials, teachers and elders) were more effective in advancing their alternative visions of national identity if they were able to build a support coalition among villagers, marshalled cross-regional ties to other identity movements, and effectively linked their framings to familiar notions of national identity (Mallon 1995). Thus, it makes a difference whether such identity leaders find support from other sources, whether their goals—and thus their support—are primarily economic, cultural or political in character, and which symbols, collective memories, and desires they are invoking in their appeals.

[6] This is one of the many ‘functions of social conflict’ Lewis Coser (1956) discussed in his magnificent elaboration of Simmel’s (1955) ideas on social conflict.

Eventually the work of such identity entrepreneurs shades over—in a process that Max Weber has ideal-typically analysed as the 'routinisation of charisma'—into the monitoring and maintenance activities of established functionaries who make a living from 'identity work'. Without such established supports, wider social identities do not have very good chances of flourishing, though many of these roles and organisations may support the cause along with other goals. For example, religious functionaries, teachers, but also tourism promoters and entertainers, may be vigorous supporters of certain ethnic identifications, even when the institutional and organisational contexts they are working in are not explicitly oriented towards social identity formation.

The role of modern states in the creation and reproduction of social identities is twofold. The first centres on states as identifiers and classifiers. Nationalism plays a central role in the legitimisation of state power. Modern states take a strong interest in how their societal constituency conceives of itself and how it relates to the apparatus of rule. As a matter of fact, through the cultivation of national identification, states tend to constitute the very societal constituencies whom they claim to represent. National identity creates a collective self-portrait, instils a sense of solidarity, establishes rights and obligations of membership, and defines the boundaries that set the nation in question apart from others. Key institutional underpinnings of national identity formation may include primary education systems (Gellner 1983; Hobsbawn 1990), public ceremonies and rituals (Kertzer 1988), but also mundane administrative practices such as issuing passports (Torpey 2000), making maps (Anderson 1983), or building roads (Weber 1976).

State involvement in social identity construction is not limited to 'nationalising' discourses and practices (Brubaker 1996). State administrative practices set in motion the creation and recreation of a wide range of social identities. The legitimacy of modern states rests to an important extent on the exercise of 'symbolic power' (Loveman 2005), the capacity to name and categorise people more generally. States routinely sort their subjects according to a variety of criteria, including gender, religion, ethnicity, caste, class, health and criminality (Scott 1998). A stark example here is the construction of modern-day caste in colonial India, when the classification activities of the British authorities superimposed a supposedly traditional caste structure on a complex web of social relations of difference and deference (Dirks 2001). Official categories of course do not seamlessly translate into social identities with cognitive and emotional relevance. States generally cannot create social identities in this literal sense. As the gradual transformation of 'Hispanics' from census category into collective identity illustrates (Kertzer and Arel 2002), state-sponsored modes of categorisation encourage identification primarily by becoming the common language both state and non-state actors refer to and struggle over (Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

The second role modern states play in the structuring of social identities is more indirect. It derives from the fact that each system of rule inevitably affects the chance of various

societal actors to acquire meaningful social identities and shapes the character of those identities. This holds true for racial and ethnic groups, religious affiliations, different groupings based on status and economic position, as well as local and regional communities.

Examples of how state action shapes boundaries, salience and character of diverse identities are abundant. Attaching legal consequences—privileges as well as disabilities—to religious, ethnic, racial and occupational groupings is common across countries and has been so throughout the history of modern states. For instance, the difference between white collar and blue collar workers in 19th and 20th century Germany was not just defined by—inevitably shaded—differences between office and factory, clean and dirty work, as well as closeness to and distance from ownership and authority; it was also delineated by legal measures, for instance by different social insurance provisions with contrasting levels of support and rules of access. Not surprisingly, these differences corresponded for a long time to separate labour unions for white and blue collar workers. It is similarly clear that any legal system of reverse discrimination or affirmative action gives greater salience, as well as sharp boundaries, to the racial and ethnic identities involved (Marx 1998).

Likewise, modern states shape social identities by providing the broader institutional framework for the collective organisation of non-state actors. As Riva Kastoryano (2002) illustrates in her work on immigration and ethnicity in France and Germany, it is the institutional infrastructure of states that privileges certain social identities around which collective organisation and interest representation takes place. For instance, a state following a corporatist model of interest mediation provides a different set of 'institutional channels' (Ireland 1994) for social identity formation than a state following a more open model of interest negotiation. An even more obvious example of institutional frameworks configuring social identities is local communities. These owe, in modern countries, their very constitution as corporate actors with defined boundaries to state action.

The two roles of states in identity formation interact with each other. Different identities within a country are affected by how states handle the cultivation of a national community. Legally, the latter is often grounded in the structures of citizenship. In addition to political citizenship, which defines people as formal members of the political community with civil and voting rights, we find in all modern states diverse forms of social citizenship, which gives access to various kinds of social provisions—to schools, healthcare, pensions etc. These state provisions of social welfare imply that national solidarity overrides differences and rivalries that otherwise may divide the citizenry. Aside from this symbolic effect, state-sponsored social provisions may well diminish divisive fights for sparse resources. In turn, however, if rival identifications are in fact stronger than national solidarities, the even-handed provision of social supports across ethnic, religious and racial lines may come under attacks that are motivated by these

identifications and aversions. If the state provides even-handed services on the basis of political and social citizenship, this can not only shape a coherent political community, but it can transform relations between different identities in a country. The perceived fairness of the state vis-à-vis a diverse society is one of the most important factors creating a culture of trust in a social arrangement.[7]

The identity work of states does not unfold in a vacuum. State-sponsored identity projects are inherently contested. As the domain of nationalism illustrates, the nation and its boundaries, the obligations and rights it creates, its historical narratives, its visions of a common future—all this is subject to political struggle. Too often national identities are thought of as uni-dimensional: a right-of-centre concern that ranges in intensity from mild patriotism to extreme forms of nationalism, which generate hostility towards other nations. Even a superficial review of history reveals, however, many forms that differ along various dimensions. Civic nationalisms that sought to stimulate public service and to assimilate heterogeneous populations into a culturally homogenous national community; ethnic nationalisms that advanced the image of an already existing ethnocultural nation to achieve statehood; and 'homeland' nationalisms that sought to defend the interests of co-nationals abroad—these are only a few examples of the rich variety we can observe in 19th century European history (Brubaker 1992; 1996). In early 20th century Latin America liberal nationalisms adopted a political-territorial understanding of the nation, envisioned national unity as achieved through the spread of 'civilisation', and viewed national history as driven by elites, while popular nationalisms promoted a cultural understanding of the nation, imagined the assimilation of the resident population into a homogeneous national identity, and viewed the masses as driving national history (vom Hau 2008). All of them were the result of political struggles in which state elites and various political contenders sought to impose their vision of national identity. These distinct conceptions of national inclusion varied in their political significance and broader resonance, with major implications for a variety of outcomes, including political development, citizenship regimes and the politics of redistribution.

Resonance

Why are social identities—and in particular imagined communities of an ethnic, religious, political or class variety—accepted and embraced? Contending identity entrepreneurs can create, recreate and diffuse social identities, but the response to these identity projects is not under their control. The dynamics of acceptance, indifference or rejection may be—and often are—quite different from identity production and attempts at

[7] See, e.g., Rothstein (1998). It is usually argued that socially, ethnically and racially homogeneous countries can more easily provide generous social supports. But the opposite hypothesis about the direction of causation—that even-handed public provisions are one of the most important foundations for trust among groups in society—holds as well.

institutionalisation by elites. The ultimate conditions of acceptance are of course manifold, reflecting the variety of potential identity repertoires and past identities available to actors as well as the specific characteristics of the identity in question. Among the underlying factors shared by many different social identities are, as noted earlier, common experiences affecting major life interests and such symbolically central commonalities as language and religion, as well as publicly recognised myths, stories and archetypes. Given these bases of possible appeals, there still remains the question of whether we can identify some factors that make for acceptance, indifference and rejection across very different kinds of possible identifications.

One central consideration is without doubt what any rationalist theory frame would first suggest: What are the perceived costs and benefits of identification? How appealing is an affiliation and which disadvantages does it bring? Often, and perhaps typically, the costs and benefits of social identities are of a symbolic-emotional and not a material nature. That may make it more difficult to assess them with precision, but it does not diminish their impact.

Yet while acceptance, indifference and rejection of a social identity are to a considerable extent the result of a cost-benefit calculus (however implicit), a simple rational choice explanation has its limitations. It tends to underemphasise the role of attachments in choices about identification, which may make rational assessment difficult. It also overlooks that 'costs' and 'benefits' are subject to social construction and redefinition, especially when the issues are highly charged with emotion, or when the particular social identity in question is perceived as primordial. For example, in case of negative discrimination based on race, religion or ethnicity, avoiding identification, for many a rational response, may be difficult and even impossible; but instead of trying to escape being identified or play the identity down, many may—given some emotional and cognitive support for this different response—embrace it as a matter of pride.

Appeals based on ascriptive criteria rather than on choice and performance deserve special consideration. Such appeals make claims of membership on grounds that often have been removed from conscious reflection by being taken for granted since early in life. Discrimination based on ascriptive criteria is generally framed as insulting and arouses strong emotions because it rejects long and often cherished personal experience and because it is at odds with standards of merit and fairness. This may help to explain a puzzle that has preoccupied many on the left and that is not easy to account for in a simple rational choice frame—that identification based on ethnicity, race, religion and nationality are often more stable, and easier to mobilize, than identification based on class positions marked by shared interest in material resources and power.

Processes of identification also have a temporal dimension. Acceptance or rejection depend to a considerable extent on *when* identity entrepreneurs appeal to a particular

identity project. The creation and routinisation of social identities are embedded in political contestations, organisational resources and institutional frameworks, just to mention a few of the relevant causal conditions developed in more detail above. As such, the broader resonance of social identities needs to be analysed vis-à-vis the temporal dynamics of theoretically relevant contexts (see Pierson 2004). For instance, the acceptance of new official national identity projects may be more likely when their recreation unfolds simultaneously with state development. By contrast, a new national identity project may face more indifference or rejection when it confronts an already well-established state institutional infrastructure (vom Hau 2008). Thus, timing and sequencing constitute another causally relevant condition of social identity formation.

The relative resonance of identities matters especially because all people participate in multiple identities. The fact that any individual may draw on many different—compatible or divergent—social identities is often overlooked. But even the most salient social identity is never the only social attachment that counts. This raises difficult questions of causation, especially about the relative weight and importance of contradictory identifications. If clan, village, kin group and family reinforce one another as a set of concentric circles, a very different outcome must be expected from simultaneous affiliations with identities that make divergent suggestions and demands. Focusing on background conditions and on the specific processes and actors involved in identity production and institutionalisation can generate some hypotheses about the relative strength of these influences.

Effects: Why social identities matter

For a close interaction network it may make only a small difference whether it is recognised and embraced as a membership group. For wider social categories the transition to acknowledged social identities is essential. It turns conceptual and statistical abstractions held by a few outsiders into social realities, with consequences for the outlook, attitudes and behaviour of the members who accept the identification.

It is important to emphasise the relative autonomy of social identities. They are entwined with organisational and structural dynamics, but not coextensive with the social structures and organisations that may build on them. Whether states and their organisational bodies, churches, political parties, hometown associations or terrorist groups, they represent themselves as speaking and acting in the names of specific social identities. Yet, these social identities are not to be equated with those organisational claims. Even national identifications, often created with the aim of legitimising state power and backed up by substantial material and symbolic resources, do not entail acceptance of the state political apparatus or the self-organisation of its civil society. A more feasible strategy is to explore the resonance of specific social, cultural

and political projects through which organisations and identity entrepreneurs seek to foster identification. When social identities gain broader salience and acceptance, they constitute a readiness for participation and for responding to activation by identity entrepreneurs and organisations. This readiness derives from the sense of attachment that corresponds to cognitive and emotional self-understandings, from the recognition of symbols representing the identity, from the concern for shared life interests, and from embracing obligations and claims that go with membership.

Social identities shape responses to appeals for collective action. This is of critical interest because it affects the recruitment of personnel, the generation of organisational resources, as well as the willingness to respond to leadership. The way incipient movements articulate their claims with the normative, cognitive and emotional outlook of established social identities is of decisive importance for their success in mobilisation. For example, social movements may be more effective in their mobilisation efforts if their framing strategies appropriate and reinterpret already popular stories and symbols (Jansen 2007). The historical trajectories of the targeted social identities make some trajectories of group organisation and representation more likely than others.

Quite similar considerations apply to structuring the relations with outsiders. In order to cultivate attachments and solidarity, it is necessary to define boundaries and to distinguish members from others. This can activate the ingroup-outgroup mechanism that sees the others as foes. Hostility towards 'the other' often springs up spontaneously. It is a frequent correlate of the creation of solidarity, an affinity that casts a shadow of moral ambiguity on solidaristic ideals (Wimmer 2002). However, whether the emergence of solidarity goes hand in hand with hostility towards others, and if so in what measure this is the case, depends largely on the dynamics of categorisation and identification, which is partially shaped by conceptions of the more comprehensive identities[8] as well as the content, salience and boundaries of the identity in question.

One mechanism that softens conflicts between mutually exclusive social identities derives from the fact that individuals carry multiple identities, which may make competing claims on them. For example, attachments of class and occupational status may connect people of different ethnic loyalties and vice versa. Such cross-cutting loyalties are likely to modify both solidarities and reduce the chances of unqualified hostility towards both class antagonists and ethnic others. In turn, as we have observed earlier, both loyalty and hostility may become reinforced if ethnic, linguistic or religious boundaries coincide with lines that separate wealth and poverty, power and subordination, or high and low occupational status (Coser 1956; Dahrendorf 1959). A closely related effect of multiple identities with divergent claims and obligations has been identified by both Durkheim (1964) and Simmel (1955). Advancing social differentiation, which brings about an

[8] See Jeffrey Alexander (2006) on the 'civil sphere' as well as the utopian ideas of Karl Marx on 'species consciousness'.

increase in the (actual and potential) social identities, induces greater and greater individualization. Individuals who respond to many different identities will develop greater autonomy and independence in their beliefs and normative orientations.

Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to develop a theory frame for the analysis of social identities. As collective creations, social identities help to shed light on individual behaviour as well as social outcomes, most importantly solidarity and conflict. Social identities are especially critical when analysts seek to understand the chances of collective action.

We have found it useful to draw on the four subjective dimensions of action to generate suggestions and hypotheses about social identity formation. Social identities are most importantly a cognitive phenomenon. They recognise certain membership relations as relevant. But cognitive identification and classification schemas are often entwined with evaluations and norms. They are also associated with restructured preferences and marked by frequently powerful emotions. In social attachments, cognitions, norms, preferences and emotions are fused into specific reference points of self-identification and external categorisation.

A variety of actors and processes are involved in the creation and recreation of social identities. The list of relevant causal conditions includes: commonalities that link up with major life interests and that can be articulated with available symbols, self-understandings and memories; recognition by others, both wanted and unwanted; social conflict with outgroups; initiating entrepreneurs and continuous organisational support; links to socialisation and upbringing, from the earliest formative influences to formal education; the development of norms once the identity has been formed; the systematic cultivation of ritual and symbols; and the temporal order of all these processes.

This causal background not only shapes the content, salience and boundaries of social identities, it also determines the institutionalisation of social identities as regular products of organisations as well as the resonance of an identity's hold on people. Conceptualised this way, social identities crucially link cultural patterns of allegiance and solidarity (as well as of discrimination and rejection) to the actions and dispositions of individuals, groups and organisations and to macro-background conditions such as comprehensive cultural patterns, social inequality and overarching institutions.

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