

## CHAPTER 2

# Identity

Identity is not fixed, it is what people name themselves or others. The process of identifying is often one of binary opposites: civilized versus barbarian, man versus woman, believer versus non-believer, city versus countryside dweller, local versus foreign. Such identification may carry social, political and legal qualifications because it implies that people have a different status and different rights. As a result, identification can also be intended to indicate another binary: superiority versus inferiority.

### 'Othering'

One way of identifying one-self is by opposing one's identity to the identity of others: us-them, black-white, civilized-barbaric, male-female, sane-sick, native-foreign. This process is called Othering. Such binaries are sometimes made for a lack of clear self-definition, but sometimes also to claim superiority towards the 'other'.

While we may refer to identity and identification as a global structure, it's also subject to global trends. For instance, from the 1950s through the 1970s, it was common to identify people in terms of class. This was a Marxist concept to analyze people's needs and predicaments, and to describe the political and social relations on a national and global scale. Looking at humankind through the lens of class determined how governments made policy, how history was studied, how people regarded each other. For instance, some states made a point of including different 'classes' of the population – like 'laborers' or 'women' – in their parliamentary representation by allotting them a reserved number of seats. Starting in the 1990s, however, this lens of class identity was replaced by identities like race, religion, gender. As a result, attention to and interest in social and economic class differentiations in society has diminished, even though these differentiations are still very much existent.

### Marxist class theory: the history of the Haitian independence war

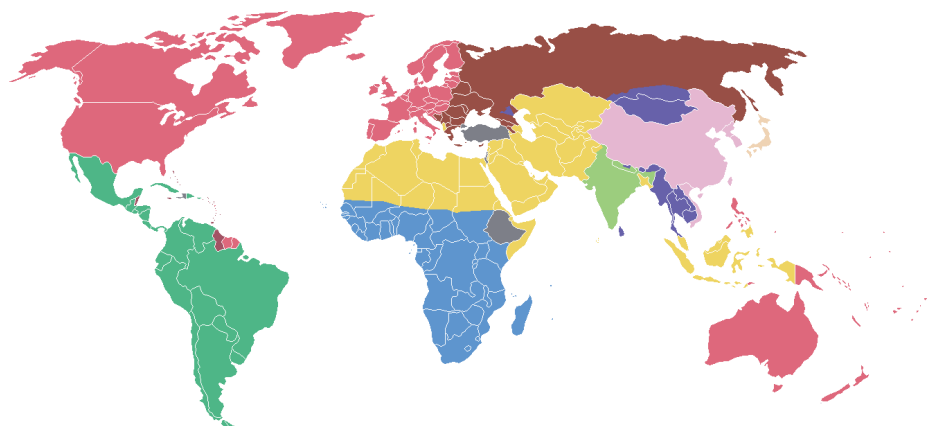
In his seminal study *The Black Jacobins* from 1938, the black historian C.L. James from Trinidad describes the causes and developments of the slave revolt of Haiti which resulted in the independence of that country. His description and analysis of the colonial oppression on Haiti is entirely framed in (Marxist) terms of property and class, and hardly refers to the issue of race.

From the 1990s onwards, we observe two new global trends in identity and identification that take place across the 3-D chessboard of human interactions. On a local, national, and global level there is the emergence of so-called identity politics. On a social and academic level we can observe the increasing popularity of understanding human relations in terms of individual identity. We will discuss both below.

## Identity politics

Since the 1980s, politicians and states, but also people in general, have shown an increasing tendency to label their societies with a distinct identity that goes beyond the average self-awareness of any nation. Mostly these are religious identities: Hindu nationalism in India, Islam as a state identity in various countries with a Muslim-majority, Judeo-Christian civilization in European countries, or the exact opposite by identifying with non-religion, as is the case with secularism in France. Others are social-cultural: Nordic culture in Scandinavian societies, African culture in African countries, the revival of various native cultures around the world, to name but a few examples.

To some observers, these identifications are not trends but innate to underlying civilizations. The political scientist Samuel Huntington elaborated this idea in the 1990s and developed it into a world map of civilizations that he labelled mostly with religious identities (Confucian, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox) and partly with geographical-cultural identities (Western, Japanese, Latin American, African). His use of different identity markers – geographic and religious – was criticized by quite some scholar (what, then, are the criteria of a ‘civilization?’), but what generated most discussion was Huntington’s assertion that the identity differences between these civilizations would cause global conflicts.



**Figure III.2.1** Huntingtons' classification of 'civilizations'

However, what Huntington was predicting seemed to reflect the reality on the ground: many states and people had started to identify themselves in categories that went beyond the identity of the community, the nation or the state. This created new and, arguably, imaginary realms or regions in which people felt bonded through a particular identity. And yes, these realms also entailed a sentiment of conflict. For instance, the notion of a 'Judeo-Christian' culture as invoked by several politicians and political parties in European countries was mostly intended to counter the perceived corruption of domestic cultures by foreign cultures (particularly Islam) introduced by immigrants. In countries with a Muslim majority, the identification with Islam has caused tensions with non-Muslim minority communities, sometimes on a national level in the form of Islamic legislation that discriminates non-Muslims, sometimes on a local level by Muslims who, emboldened by the pronounced Islamic identity of their state, started to harass non-Muslims. A similar development is taking place in India, where the government of the Hindu national party contributed to already existing tensions between the Hindu majority and the Muslim minority. And in Russia, the self-identification of a greater Russia with Orthodox roots entailed the reclaiming of former empirical territories, and was one of the justifications to invade Ukraine in 2022.

The question is whether these processes are a cause or effect. Is identity inherently part of regional 'civilizations' and are these identities now being abused, causing tensions and even violence? This is what Huntington claims, arguing that such civilizations and their clashes are global structures. Another view, however, holds that these processes are a recent global trend, in other words self-identification is a recent phenomenon that has contributed to the establishment of regional identities. Regardless of the correct explanation of these developments, we are witnessing the increasing popularity of national and regional identity formation and the confrontations they invoke. More importantly, in many instances, these national and regional identities have turned into identity politics that can take extremist forms, as illustrated by Jewish (not always Israeli) settlers on the West Bank, white supremacists in Western countries, Muslim extremist organizations in various countries with a Muslim majority, and Hindu nationalists in India.

Self-identification as discussed so far focuses on the national and regional levels. But (self)-identification also takes place on a global scale. In the 1950s, during the Cold War, Western countries distinguished between the (rich) 'First World' and (poor) 'Third World', with communist countries occupying the position of 'Second World'. Later, a dichotomy was made between 'Developed' and 'Underdeveloped' countries, which in turn was changed into what was considered the more politically correct terminology of 'Developed' and 'Developing' countries. From the 1990s onwards, with the rise of former 'developing' countries like India, Brazil, South Africa, China and several Southeast Asian countries as economic powers, a new terminology came into place: the global North and the global South. This distinction

is made in several ways. One is economic: the countries of the global North are said to be in political and economic decline, whereas those of the global South are, or are expected to be, in a political and economic lift. Another distinction is political and based on a post-colonial resentment: the global South is accusing the global North of not living up to moral, democratic and international legal standards it claims to uphold. In other words, the global South is challenging the global North's assumed position of superiority. An example is Israel's 2023-24 war in Gaza: most countries in the global North maintained their support of Israel, while most countries in the global South supported the Palestinians, and South Africa even brought Israel up on charges of genocide before the International Court of justice.

**Putin: sovereignty of 'civilizational states'**

According to Russian president Putin, the world is divided in civilizations, and each civilization is ruled by several powerful states. Only such 'civilizational states' are entitled to sovereignty and leadership within their civilizations. The other states in that civilization have no full sovereignty.

(Maria Lagutina et. al., *The Routledge Handbook of Russian International Relations Studies*, 2023)

## Individual identification

We now live in times when people increasingly take the initiative to self-identify rather than conform to labels or assumptions imposed by others. This may put them outside of the group that they would normally be identified with, like those considered to be men who self-identify as women. Self-identification and the identification by others may also yield very different perceptions: someone who self-identifies as an aristocrat may be identified by others as a black person, just like the person who self-identifies as the CEO of a company may be identified by others as a woman. Scholars have been trying to come up with labels that can serve as neutral identifiers. That has turned out to be challenging because the charged historical legacy of some terminology.

### Race

'Race' is one of these terms: it was used to refer to hereditary qualities of groups of people. This was a common practice all over the world: the Chinese, for instance, considered people with dark skins or 'ash-white' skins to be inferior. However, it was the Europeans who brought this notion to a global level. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the biological sciences in Europe tried to categorize all living things, including humankind. They did not only identify but also hierarchized

the so-called human races. It was the kind of scientific research that quickly had political and social repercussions because it was used to justify the way Europeans (including those living in Australia and the two Americas) perceived the world in which they envisaged themselves the pinnacle of power and civilization. The notion of race thus became very much part of the European colonial practices and terminology that was applied across the world.

#### Origin of 'race'

The first use of the term 'race' has been traced back to fifteenth century Spain, where the three religious communities – Christians, Jews, Muslims – were called *razzas*. This term denoted a human quality that was based on blood 'purity' and ancestry. Hence, Muslims and Jews who converted to Catholicism were not considered 'real' Christians, and even their children and grandchildren retained the name *morisco* (for Christians of Muslim origin) and *converso* (for Christians of Jewish origin).

There has been overall academic consensus since the 1950s that the notion of 'race' holds little meaning in the biological and natural sciences and that categories of human 'races' are artificial. Genetic analyses have shown that there is enormous genetic diversity *within* so-called 'races' (like white, black, or other) while only a small percentage of genetic diversity exists *between* these races. In other words, the notion of a biological race based on an isolated gene pool is factually untrue. However, the phenotypes (the visible appearances) of human beings still play an important role in social interactions. Social scientists, when studying how social groups interact, see the need to use the terminology of 'race' when discussing social interactions based on phenotype. Today, the notion of 'race' is therefore a socio-political rather than a scientific concept.

#### 'Race does not travel'

Racial identification (when people are said to be 'white', or 'black', or 'coloured', or otherwise) differs from social place to place and is therefore context related.

(Paul C. Taylor, *Race. A Philosophical Introduction*, 2022 (3rd edition))

## Racism

The use of racial concepts is not a recent phenomenon. It is of all times and all peoples. But Western racism stands out in a very specific way because it is the legacy of a past in which the Western world had so much influence in the world that they could define race and impose it on the daily lives of most of the world population.

While the notion of race has since then been discarded in most academic disciplines, the notion of racism has become very popular in the Humanities. This may sound paradoxical, but it is not, because there are two different elements at play: *race* is about biological quality, while *racism* is about social behavior. Racism is based on differences in phenotypes and on the assumption that these differences also represent different cultural, intellectual or even biological qualities.

We must also keep in mind that what constitutes racism is often determined by national contexts. Much academic knowledge today about racism is produced by American universities, where the historical context of trans-Atlantic slavery and particular forms of slavery and ensuing forms of discrimination play a central role in these academic discussions. These circumstances are different from, for instance, the issue of race in South America where the Spanish conquerors and colonizers upheld different racial concepts and practices compared to those that affected black people in North America. And the notions of race and racism were yet again different in the experiences and practices in Africa, the Arab world, India, and South-East Asia.

**‘Whiteness’** is a concept that is used in racism discourse to describe social power structures that prevailed among middle and upper classes in Western societies during times of colonialism. Whiteness stands for what is assumed to be the average standard of living that, in turn, is considered by those in power to be the measure stick of all society. Whiteness, therefore, is not necessarily related to skin colour: it is an imagined state of being that is said to be pervasive across the world. The concept proposes that these structures are still dominant in Western societies, but also on a global scale.

### Other terms

While the concept of ‘racism’ has become one of the more prevalent concepts used in Humanities to understand social interactions, other terminology is also still in use. The result is an array of notions with overlapping meanings. For instance, whereas race refers to the phenotype of a person or people, **ethnicity** refers to a common culture and origin. For instance, black people can have different ethnicities (Caribbean, West-African, Afro-American). Another term, already used in this textbook, is **nation**, which refers to a community that has (or perceives) a bond based on culture, language, history, and religion.

This terminology can become quite confusing. For instance, the term **nationality** never refers to membership of a nation, but always to that of state. And not all people belonging to the same nation share the same ethnicity. Imagine, for example, people of Iranian origin who have lived in Germany for three generations and have

German nationality: to what ethnicity and nation do they belong? Often this is a matter of (self-)identification more than biological or social accuracy.

### Nation or ethnicity?

Nation and ethnicity are almost synonyms: they both refer to a group of people that share a common culture, background and origin. In common parlance, however, it appears that 'ethnicity' also refers to the phenotype (the visible appearances) of the group members.

A term that used to be popular among social scientists and historians during the 1960s, is **class**. This refers to a social standing based on wealth and, as a derivative of that wealth, a social position that can be hereditary. For instance, aristocrats derived their social status from their wealth, which used to be the income from the lands or commercial enterprises they owned, and their children would benefit from this. Today, even though the aristocracy may have lost much of its standing, having the means to afford good education, health care and housing, contributes to one's social advancement and position in society. Typical of class – and opposed to markers like ethnicity, gender or race – is that social positions can be lost or attained, which usually depends on the person's income. The relation with the other markers is that every racial, ethnic or national group has class stratifications. However, ethnicity often trumps class: people may be very rich but can still be looked down upon if their family pedigree, ethnic background or color of their skin does not match that of the dominant group, for instance.

### The complexity of 'diversity'

Companies, governments, universities, and other institutions in Western countries try to overcome the 'white' exclusivity of their staff, employees and students by implementing so-called diversity policies. However, the focus thereby is often on race and ethnicity, and little on class. By overlooking this social-economic dimension, the diversity runs the risk of being lopsided.

One other term of social classification is **gender**. This is a category that is found in all other categories. The trend of individuals determining and proclaiming their own identity is perhaps best demonstrated by the case of gender: the traditional dichotomies of man-woman and homosexual-heterosexual have been opened up to include a wide array of gender identities. While this may appear to be a new development, the novelty of it is not the existence of these multiple identities – these

have existed for as long as humankind – but the fact that they have become part of public and political debate.

### Transgender in Iran

In Iran, transgender operations are allowed and widely practiced. However, only one of two outcomes is allowed: the person can only be a man or a woman. All other gender modalities are not accepted, nor is homosexuality which is a capital crime.

Scholars realize that all these categories can be fluid and overlapping and can come together in one and the same person. For this reason, the notion of **intersectionality** was introduced. This concept holds that a person's vulnerability to discrimination or oppression is often not caused by a single category of identity. An example is the black woman, where race and gender play 'intersecting' roles in the manner how she is treated. The status of class will play an additional role: is this black woman well-to-do and with a high-profile job, or does she live in a poor neighborhood doing night shifts?

### Gender statistics

"Between 2019 and 2022, nearly 40% of countries – home to over 1.1. billion women and girls in 2022 – stagnated or declined on gender equality."

*(2024 SDG Gender Index)*

Best performing countries (2024) in closing the gender gap in economy, health, education, politics:

1. Iceland
2. Finland
3. Norway
4. New Zealand
5. Sweden
6. Nicaragua
7. Germany
8. Namibia
9. Ireland
10. Spain

*(Global Gender Gap Report, 2024)*

## Globalization and glocalization of identity

We have seen that identity plays a role on the individual level and increasingly also on the national level (identity politics), sometimes even on a global level (North-South tensions). But two events that happened locally were to propel the issues of race and gender to a global level. In 2018, the accusations of sexual abuse against Hollywood tycoon Harvey Weinstein contributed to the worldwide popularity of the social movement known as #MeToo. It would reopen debates across the globe on power and violence in gender relations. A year later, in 2019, the killing of a black man by the name of George Floyd by a white police officer did the same for the social movement known as Black Lives Matter: their protests in the United States sparked mass demonstrations across the world.

In both instances, the focus was on power and violence in race and gender relations. These issues had been raised time and again for decades but now gained a global attention that seems to have brought on a significant change: not only did victims feel empowered to speak out and did perpetrators have less of an opportunity to get away with their behavior, but progress was also made on a governmental and institutional level to address these social structures. At the same time, however, there were strong counter forces across the globe that wanted to maintain the dominant structures of the man-woman gender division, preferably embedded in a patriarchal system. In Western societies, a racial component was added to these counter forces that argued for preserving the nation's authenticity.

## Further reading

- Samir Amin, "The Future of Global Polarization," *Africa Today*, Vol. 40, No. 4, 1993, pp. 75-86
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- Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The demand for dignity and the politics of resentment*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018
- Joseph L. Graves Jr. and Alan H. Goodman, *Racism, not Race. Answers to frequently asked questions*, Columbia University, 2021
- Amy Gutman (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton University Press, 1994
- Paul C. Taylor, *Race. A Philosophical Introduction*, Polity Pr, 2022 (3rd edition)
- Peter Wade, *Race. an Introduction*, Cambridge University Press, 2015