

# The Identity Group

An informal seminar meeting regularly throughout the  
1991/92 year, organized by Anthony A. Long

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One of the unplanned events of this year was a set of meetings, attended by a large number of the fellows and their partners, that came to be known as the Identity Group. As the organizer of these gatherings, I was invited to present a report on our work at the meeting of the Old Fellows' Association on July 3. The text of the lecture I gave on that occasion is printed here.

## 1

The Identity Group was conceived in a moment last October. Its birthplace might have been just about anywhere in the Wissenschaftskolleg, but as often happens in academic life, conception came via a chance conversation — in the mail room. There, where the blessed Barbara Sanders presides, I found myself talking with the Chilean anthropologist, Larissa Lomnitz. We identified ourselves to each other, as scholars typically do, by describing our current research interests — hers in social networks by which individuals define themselves in modern Mexico, mine in ancient Greek models of mind. As the conversation developed, two things became clear. First, in spite of our different fields and backgrounds we shared an interest in the concept of a human identity, by which I mean the complex factors that make someone the particular person he or she is. What became equally clear was something directly personal, our interest in one another as new members of a college who would be interacting on a daily basis. This latter interest, or curiosity if you will, would be commonplace in any group of persons joining a new institution. But in our case it was special precisely because of the interdisciplinary goals of the Wissenschaftskolleg and its encouragement of group discussion and interaction.

The kind of encounter I had with Larissa Lomnitz was immediately replicated when I met Menachem Fisch, historian of science, Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, social historian, and Hinderk Emrich, psychiatrist and phil-

osopher. We were eager to learn about one another in any case, but that eagerness was reinforced by realizing that in talking together on a regular basis we would have an excellent forum for exploring an interest in human identity that they too shared. From this confluence of the intellectual and the personal the Identity Group was born. It was both a social gathering and an academic seminar. This two-sidedness was what made the group work.

I say two-sidedness. But that expression, like the distinction between intellectual and personal, already raises a question about human identity. We are not intellectuals or professors and persons (though we have all met professors who made it hard to realize they were persons.) A seminar is also a social gathering, and people have intellectual discussions at parties. In characterizing the Identity Group as I did, I conformed to a conventional way of looking at human life, a convention which divides what we do or who we are into compartments — public or private, professional or political, familial or recreational, etc. The convention is as useful as it is often unavoidable. We all, as Shakespeare said, play many parts. Our identity is multiform. None the less, something seems to hold the parts together organizing them and ordering them.

Our project in the Identity Group turned out to be an investigation of that elusive something— the glue of a human identity. If we made progress, as I think we did, it was largely because each one of us was a representative of the very subject we were investigating. From the outset we interacted not as professionals in this or that field, but as a group of whole persons entitled to contribute anything at all that was relevant, whether it was based upon academic knowledge, other experience, ethical conviction, or gut feeling. The openness of our discussions involved, I could say, an opening of ourselves. Naturally, that often led to disagreements. But it enabled us, as a group, to recognize dimensions and complexities to human identity which would have eluded us if we had proceeded in a more formal way. We ourselves, through the opinions and attitudes we expressed, became part of the data on human identity.

We met of an evening on about fourteen occasions, often in one of the Villa Walter apartments. Membership was open. A few dropped out, others joined later. Our most active participants included several of the fellows' partners. The hard-core members, who never missed a meeting, were around ten in number. They, or I should say we, view the Identity Group as one of the best things that happened to us in this splendid year in Berlin.

What I have just said is enough perhaps to show why "identity" became a funny word in the Kolleg this year. As the Identity Group, we did not have an official standing, like that of the Linguists during this year. Those fellows who had other things to do wondered what secret rites we prac-

tised. What identities did we discover or uncover in our conclaves? We talked a lot — that was clear — but was the talk scientific, disciplined, appropriately methodological? What, in a word, did we learn or succeed in explaining about identity? In the rest of these remarks I shall address this question.

## 2

The group began from the wish of various fellows to explore questions such as these: What makes a nation or a political group? What makes a person the same and different through time? What do we recognize of ourselves in cultures that are radically different from our own? What defines the individual human being, subjectively and objectively? Under what circumstances does the self or ego become fragmented or problematic?

Because of these common interests we thought it best not to imprison them in a formal agenda of topics and theories. Instead, we decided to invite members of the group to choose a text which, in that person's opinion, treated aspects of human identity in ways that could profitably be discussed by the rest of us. The person who chose the text introduced it at our meetings, commented on it and suggested lines of inquiry about the particularities of identity for the group to discuss. There then followed a conversation, which took its starting-point from the text, but regularly ranged far beyond it as people offered their own viewpoints on salient aspects of identity. The choice of readings was completely free. I began with a short story by Borges, *The Gospel According to Mark*, and for the most part we stayed with fiction. Other readings included Kafka's *Process* (Hinderk Emrich), Vargas Llosa's *Maytas Geschichte* (Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey), Kleist's *Amphitryon* (Emmanuel Terray), Camus' *L'Étranger* (Mario Vargas Llosa), Naipaul's *The Engine of Arrival* (Ian Buruma), Kundera's *The Joke* (Larissa Lomnitz and Andrei Pleșu), some classical Chinese texts (Michael Lackner) and Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (Monique Elias). We also read parts of the book by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (revised ed., London, 1991), introduced by Bruce Ackerman, but that was our only use of a scholarly work. On two occasions we discussed films, one a documentary called *The Human Face*, directed by Laurie Anderson (Claudia Schmölders), and the other Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal* (Menachem Fisch), which we treated with reference to the text as well. That is far from being a complete account of our doings. (Towards the end of our sessions, we engaged in a good deal of theoretical discussion, starting from presentations made by Lolle Nauta, Michael Lackner and myself.) The important point, which emerged unplanned but very clearly, was the fecundity of literary texts as catalysts for the questions we found that we wanted to explore.

I have used the word "explore" because it captures both the way we proceeded and what gave the group its dynamic and effectiveness. In academic life one typically starts from "the state of the question", a set of problems clarified and defined by a professional community. That is clearly appropriate for many investigations, but some topics are so enormous and complex that they may be better handled by assuming, as we did, that although no one is an expert everyone has something vital to contribute. None of us, of course, was deliberately side-stepping Freud or Geertz or Foucault or other theoreticians who have shaped our modern perspectives on identity. Theories external to the Group were mentioned from time to time, but they were secondary to what I would call the direct meetings of minds, pooling their own (very much their own) interpretations of the material and the conceptual issues that it raised.

Because we started from no official preconceptions about human identity — a Freudian self, a social self, a modern western or post-modern self — our findings emerged spontaneously, as individual or group responses to each specific text. By the end of our meetings, we had established a large number of categories for analysing identity, but I will postpone these for the moment. How we arrived at them is intimately related to the texts we studied. Let me give you some examples, which will help to show identity and its problematics in the making.

In Borges' short story, *The Gospel According to Mark*, an Argentinian medical student finds himself marooned for some days in a remote farmhouse as a result of a flood. He shares the house with an illiterate family of three people. They are of mixed Scottish and Indian blood. Espinosa, the student, decides he will read to them. Short of books, he finds a bible and over meals he reads aloud the Gospel of Mark. The family listen to him intently, and begin treating him with great respect. He offers himself an intellectual's explanation of their interest in the Gospel, referring to anthropology and genetic transmission of culture. He is asked by the father to read the Gospel story again. The father then asks him whether Christ saved everyone, including the Roman soldiers. Espinosa, previously described as a free-thinker, says "yes". The family then drag him outside and crucify him, a death which he appears to accept willingly.

I have radically shortened this very short story, but my summary is sufficient, I think, to indicate its richness for our purposes as inquirers into human identity. The story raises questions about race, class, education, group interaction, reason and emotion; it raises questions about viewpoint — Espinosa from his own perspective, from that of the narrator, from that of the family who kill him, and of course, from the reader's perspective. It raises questions about motivation and choice— Who is doing what? Under what description do Espinosa and the others act? Is he to be read as

a Christ-like figure, or as someone who inadvertently but explicably experiences catastrophe?

You can decline to answer these questions, perhaps. You can treat the story as more dream-like than bearing on normal life. But what you cannot do is to opt out of engagement with its protagonist and his fate. The story implicates much that is basic to a human identity — inherited background, choices that are circumstantially initiated, interaction with others, disclosure of latent possibilities, and a gruesome intelligibility in the concatenation of all the story's components. The story, or the life of Espinosa, has no meaning perhaps, yet it makes sense.

Questions about meaning or making sense arose frequently in our discussions. We were interested, as I said, in the glue of identity — what it is that holds the parts together? It was obvious from everything we read and knew that many of the parts are inalienable and given — gender, class, race, and that other parts are acquired by social interaction, bestowed from the outside, as it were. Kleist's *Amphitryon* shows how powerfully role identification (or public presentation of self) may be connected to self-perception. What Jupiter and Mercury steal from Amphitryon and Sosias, is the position in the world by which they identify themselves, as king and king's retainer respectively. In this comedy of errors (made the more piquant by Jupiter's ability to pose as a more convincing Amphitryon than the real figure of that name) the glue of identity is coextensive with the internalization of social position and its attendant evaluations or emotions.

But in much that we read identity presented itself not as a function of social role or other inalienable data but as a project or goal or ideology (that is the case with Vargas Llosa's *Mayta*). Under this description identity signifies a purposive direction to one's life — that one has something to live for and, if necessary, to die for. Identity, we found ourselves repeatedly saying, involves identification — taking a selection of one's necessary or chosen parts as constitutive of the glue that holds a self together. In several of the texts we studied this selective dimension was problematic, and problematic in interestingly different ways.

Kafka's Joseph K. holds together by anxiety as distinct from forward-looking autonomy. His identity seems to consist in the tension between his former life (memories of relative happiness) and present fears concerning what the world thinks of him and may do to him. Joseph K. is a displaced self, who projects his fears on to his environment instead of internalizing the outer world on its own assessment of him. In contrast with Joseph K., whose self-reflection is neurotically unrelenting, Camus' *Stranger* seemed to some of us too lacking in commitment to anything (including his own happiness) to have the makings of a credible human identity.

## 3

The propriety of such responses as literary judgements was not our chief concern. We used the literature we read as material for fashioning our own thoughts about identity. The fictional identities we studied served as instruments for articulating philosophical reflections about basic conditions of human individuality and selfhood. Two aspects of literary narrative proved to be particularly valuable in this connection.

The first aspect I will call perspective. As ordinary human-beings, we suffer from limitations that the novelist can dispel by the stroke of a pen. He can reveal his characters from points of view that conform to ordinary experience — conversation, internal monologue etc. — but he can also show his characters as others see them or he can offer his own judgements on them. We too, of course, derive much of our own identity from social responses, but we can never see the back of our own heads. There is always more to any one of us than can be present to our own or anyone else's consciousness. Our actual identities and the identities we ascribe to others are unavoidably perspectival and partial. We live in time and we change through time. The novelist's time is static, so to speak. He can deploy perspectives that ordinary life forecloses, but, in addition, all that he wants to say on behalf of his characters is present. They have a completeness that we lack, at least until our death. Even when we are dead, there is no one text that holds all that we were. We can never be scrutinized in the way we can scrutinize a fictional character.

The novelist's use of perspective (here I must generalize of course) is unreal because his characters, in terms of flesh and blood, are so much less than ourselves. Their completeness is also a measure of their unreality, but it is useful, for the study of real identity, precisely as a check on the incompleteness that colours real-life perspectives. At the same time as he plays God by his use of perspectives, the novelist imitates life-like situations and thereby invites us to confer a human identity on something that is no more than a mental construct. So our understanding of actual human identity is tested and put to work in our interpretation of fiction.

The second aspect of fiction or autobiography that we found helpful is its tendency to focus upon critical moments, situations in which a character faces a decision or a challenge, or is compelled to try to make sense of his life in the aftermath of radical change or altered perspectives. The glue of identity, fluid though it is, remains constant in everyone who is recognizably the same individual. But our consciousness of identity, or an experience of losing it or questioning it, is frequently precipitated by crisis — puberty, divorce, middle-age, radical transition, the approach of disaster or death. How consciousness of identity and its problems is related to

identity as such — the glue — is a nice question. There are reasons for thinking that human identity is strongest and most effective when its owner acts unselfconsciously. But, however that may be, we were struck as a group by the importance of crisis as a moment when identity becomes transparently central to an individual's experience.

The crisis might be relatively painless, as in the case of the cosmopolitan Naipaul's return to his native West Indies where he feels alienated from all that has shaped his upbringing (*The Enigma of Arrival*). Or, as we found in thinking about Bergman's *Seventh Seal*, a crisis (in this case the imminence of plague) may be the event that makes each individual's identity clearest: crisis compels all who are faced with it to show where they stand, affirming life, resignation, desperation as the case may be.

Identity at its most basic explains constancy through time and change. The reason why we in the west hear so much about identity today is that the identifications which typically constitute its glue — identifications with nation, family, an habitual way of life etc. — become unstuck or, what may be worse, become fixations which trap the individual in an excessively narrow self-perception. Our readings and discussions helped us to see that an identity grounded only in external relations is perpetually at risk. The internal grounding of identity — in projects, purposiveness, coming to terms with one's own history and personality — this struck us by its absence or presence in many of the texts we read. It was present conspicuously in the reflections of the second century B. C. Chinese historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien (see his "Letter in Reply to Jen Shao-ch'ing", in Burton Watson's *Grand Historian of China*, 1963). In the very act of appearing to apologise for the conduct that has ruined his public standing, Ssu-ma Ch'ien succeeds in integrating his past actions with his present predicament. He uses the polite formulae of self-deprecation as a means of affirming what, in another culture, we would call political courage, acceptance of responsibility, and moral consistency.

In discussing the Chinese material we found a mixture of the alien and the familiar. Concepts of human identity vary through time and culture of course, but the analytical categories we found ourselves formulating — perspective, imposed or chosen identifications, social role, project and purposiveness, self-reflection and autonomy, the significance of crisis — these and other categories we talked about seemed to be appropriate instruments for discussing any human identity, fictional or actual. These categories provided us with ways of assessing our case-studies, measuring them against our own experience, empathizing with them or finding them lacking in some respect — reacting to them, in other words, as we react to real people or to ourselves in moments of self-reflection.

As the individuals that we are, we cannot avoid a perspectival or subjective understanding of human identity. By the same token, a human identity can only be approximately analysed because of its unique positioning in time and place. These limitations, however, underline the value of our group discussions of identity for our particular tasks as historians, philosophers, anthropologists etc. Because perspective is always relative, what we see, with respect to human identity, is similarly variable. Yet even though we cannot achieve *A View From Nowhere*, we can, as Thomas Nagel has argued in his book of that title (Oxford, 1986), enlarge or vary our individual perspectives, thereby making our conception of human identity more capacious.

The last text that we studied, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, derives its importance from this point. One way of reading the book is to see it as an allegory about breaking down the external determinants of human identity — identification with race, class, east, west — and refashioning it from mentalities that are integrative rather than binary or dualistic. The book is surrealist and utopian, but it confronts large questions about human adaptability to radical change and the basis for identity in a multicultural world. Rushdie, it was suggested, looks to inter-subjective intuition ("following your nose") rather than rationality as the human faculty which can bridge the gap between self and other. The identity he looks for is an effective quality of shared purposiveness, integrating internal feeling with co-operative living.

Our Group divided in its approval or disapproval of intuition as a faculty relevant to the understanding of identity. The basis for the disagreement is less important than what it tells us about our work. As in a Socratic discussion, we rapidly found that what was being examined was not only our intellectual position but also our own values and emotions, or rather the very commitments that help to make up our own identities. Many of the texts we read were effective precisely because of the self-analytical challenge they present. In order to have anything worth saying about our test-cases, we had to discover the roots of identity in our individual experience. Apart from anything we learned collectively about identity, the group gave me, as I know it gave others, an enlargement of perspective. That has already shaped my specialized work and will continue to do so.

Anthony Long