

'The philosopher Vincent Descombes has aptly shown that the notion of identity is paradoxical, because while we attribute identity to individuals, identity itself looks for belonging. But I will add: one speaks of one's own identity, or what sets one in relation with others, either to affirm what we have in common, or, conversely, distinguish oneself or even to withdraw from the common. The one does not go without the other.' Etienne Balibar

Identity is an undeniably important idea in terms of how we experience the world and relate ourselves within it, and therefore it is vital to analyse how it functions and the impact it has. It is defined as 'the fact of being who or what a person or thing is'¹, and from this, most would consider it a relatively constant concept, both in terms of how it is considered in society over time, and how one's own identity is defined. This is one of the many contradictions faced when evaluating identity today, as the idea is deeply antithetical to itself and, given how politicised individual and group identity has become, to 'withdraw from the common' corresponds more with group affirmation than ever. To explore this further, it is necessary to discuss major philosophical ideas around identity, and the importance of issue in a modern context.

As Balibar builds on these, it is important first to understand and analyse Vincent Descombes' ideas of identity and how it can be understood as a primarily ontological problem. Descombes starts² by using Alexandre Kojève's definition that 'being is and nothingness is not'. Taking this, Descombes expands to say that being is the 'analytic sense of identity', or, that in order for something to participate in being, it has to always be identical, or immutable. He relates this to nature, as in nature there is no appetite for change and instead a sense of stability and cohesion, whereas humanity demonstrates the desire to strive beyond what has been achieved, and therefore there is constant change, and an absence of identity. Further, as nothingness is the opposite of being, nothingness is thereby the opposite of identity, and so it can be said to always be at difference with itself, or non-identical. However, the paradox that Balibar references is the fact that being must always be positive- for example, 'it is not raining' does not show us what the weather is identical to but instead what it is different to- and so it cannot be said that 'being is not identical with difference', and therefore the notion that being is identity as a predicate becomes problematic.

Descombes focuses on the metaphysical idea of being, which was influenced by what was originally presented by Hegel, the master-slave dialectic³. Kojève concentrated on this idea within the framework of social recognition. He argued that history began with the first struggle, which ended with the first masters and slaves, and all people fall within one of these two categories in relation to an element of who they are. Kojève went on to say that the most important distinction between the two is that the slave has knowledge that the master does not- that is to say, for the master, all he knows is that he has dominance over the slave, but he does not understand that his status (or identity) is dependent on this. The slave, on the other hand, is in the position of being 'owned', and so can understand the interdependence of the relationship. This is similar to what Balibar has argued, in that people are defined by how they are relation to others, in this analogy master or slave. Kojève's argument differs slightly, as Balibar implies that the social identity- the 'common'- is

¹ Oxford English Dictionary, 2019

² Descombes, 1980

³ Kojève, 1969

at odds with the individual identity, as they are in a sense two sides of the same coin. On the other hand, the master-slave dialectic demonstrates that identity is exclusively socially determined. For example, your identity as a daughter only exists because you had parents to be a daughter to, and what it means to be a good (or bad) daughter depends on your family, culture and society. Furthermore, a major way we identify ourselves is through our occupational identity, determined by 'occupational participation'⁴, or effectively a person's work history. Our public identity and therefore value are largely determined by this, and this is entirely relevant to the social structure we work within. This kind of argument suggests that the most intimate and private elements of a person's identity are in fact inseparable from her society, and that is how one is set 'in relation with others'.

Descombes discusses a general philosophical argument about identity. When considering this in terms of the reality of society, we can see this idea of the importance of social recognition for identity in modern 'identity politics', which is another concern of Balibar's. Demonstrated within it is the futility of expecting identity to be invariable, and, as Balibar says, the mutual relationship between identification and amalgamation. This is relevant broadly to the struggle of marginalised groups, as associating oneself, for example as a Muslim in a non-Muslim country, makes Islam the defining part of who you are and pulls you out from the crowd, therefore demonstrating a mutual relationship between inclusion and exclusion. There are further important issues here about social identity. Firstly, it is almost impossible to not have contradictions between elements of your identity, especially given that the meaning of relatively abstract concepts such as religion and nationhood can be fluid and determined by popular contemporary opinions. For example, a Muslim woman in France who wears a burka may find it difficult to identify as French given her country prevents her making what she views as an inoffensive religious choice in any public school⁵, and 64% of her fellow citizens support the 2016 'burkini ban'⁶. Secondly, assuming all people who belong to a certain group are identical is the very foundations of discrimination and raises the question of how we decide what part of our identity is the most prevalent.

In discussing this, we must first deal with the historical development of identity as a concept. Oscar Wilde said "'Know thyself" was written over the portal of the antique world. Over the portal of the new world, "Be thyself" shall be written'⁷, and this speaks accurately to the transition of human definition experienced during the early modern period in Europe particularly. In medieval Britain, one was seen by themselves and their community primarily as their social status and occupation as determined by your birth right within the feudal system, and for the 85% of the population who were peasants⁸, it was only important to this limited group. There was no need for further distinctions as people were not understood to exist within any other context. It is not entirely true that there was no recognition of issues surrounding cultural identity- the 13th century writings of Jocelin of Furness documented the diverse array of nationalities living in the Vale of the Nightshade, including some French elite, Anglo-Saxons, and Irish, and the tensions that arose from this (although mostly in the context of the difficulties of communication in the country at this time)⁹.

⁴ Phelan and Kinsella, 2009

⁵ www.wikipedia.com, 2019

⁶ FRANCE 24 English, 2016

⁷ Wilde, 2004

⁸ www.bl.uk, 2015

⁹ www.historyextra.com, 2012

However, several movements and developments over time have caused identity to be a question of much greater importance and complexity. Included in this is the Enlightenment in Europe in the late 17th century, as reason and deism grew as ideas and so questioning the existence of God left the further question of how humans are defined without Him. Furthermore, perhaps the most influential element is democratisation, and this in part explains the notable French preoccupation with identity, as the Revolution was a defining historical moment in turning a man into a citizen, and so he was able to democratically represent his own interests within a country. This is naturally taken further by then asking whose interests you represent as a part of a narrower group- as a professional, like a miner or doctor, and then more personally, like as a gay man or Hindu within your country.

Perhaps the most interesting modern development on this is through globalisation, which broadens the possibility for association with groups, as in 2016 over 40% of the world was able to communicate among themselves by having Wi-Fi¹⁰. This expands the parameters of groups and speeds up the rate at which people can form new associations and gain recognition within their society. For example, between 2000 and 2010 (inclusive), ten countries legalised gay marriage, whereas between 2011 and 2017 the same happened in 16 countries¹¹. This domino effect of recognition is enhanced by global access to the possibility of acceptance. Therefore, it is evident that the way an individual identifies has become much more nuanced, and this supports Balibar's idea, as needing to make your personal identity more and more specific leads to a feeling of difference between you and a wider range of groups of people. But there are still controversies such as arguments over whether trans women should be recognised as women in sports. Or, more broadly, do you get to define your own identity? This gives an idea of the sources for the current obsession with identity in social and political life.

If your personal sense of identity – your sense of who you are – is tied up with your feeling that your group is recognized in the right way by society, this can become dangerous. If people think of their way of life as threatened this can be the basis of a racist or violent politics, and politicians can use people's fears to whip up these concerns. This is done through populism, where political leaders create the feeling that society would be better if kept in a way that benefits the majority- such as Donald Trump with his slogan to 'Make America Great Again'. Often these types of political movements are associated with strong leaders who represent the values of the group in an almost exaggerated way, although the 2016 Brexit movement would also fall into this category of a desire to reassert national sovereignty without a clear leader.

On the other hand, there can be legitimate concerns about preservation of identities. An interesting example is language. In Canada, the French speaking province of Quebec argues for special constitutional protections for its language, which is seen as central to the way of life and identity of its inhabitants due to the fact 95% of the population speak French as a first or second language, and

¹⁰ www.washingtonpost.com, 2016

¹¹ www.pewforum.com, 2017

77% are native francophones¹². There is a similar argument about Catalonia in Spain, and this has resulted in a major political crisis around linguistic policy¹³. These are very contentious issues for these societies, and Descombes would argue that a part of the reason for this is the fact language participates in true identity behaviour¹⁴, as it is intrinsic to how the culture operates. If we see individual and social identity as linked, we can see why people are so unwilling to compromise and why these issues are so difficult to navigate.

A different example is discussed by Francis Fukuyama¹⁵, who frames the issue in terms of dignity, as marginalised and underrepresented groups feel that their inner worth is not being recognised by the majority group, for example, in the 2017 'MeToo' movement, it is primarily women feeling that their dignity is not being recognised by men, and this serves as an explanation as to why the prejudice that underpins sexual assault is so normalised. Fukuyama sees this as what is at the heart of the establishment of a movement, the point at which the members' aims become 'in terms of the dignity of the group of which they are members', and this is the first half of Balibar's idea that we 'affirm what we have in common'. The second half, however, comes when considering 'lived experience', or your composite identity that determines how your life is lived. Fukuyama compares this to the German words 'Erlebnis' and 'Erfahrung', both of which mean experience, but the first is more literal and comparable to objective perception, whereas the second means shared experience. This is the way in which identity draws us out from the common- one person's composite identity and lived experience can never be entirely equivalent to another's.

To return to Balibar's ideas, it can clearly be seen that individual and social identity are inseparable, and the way they interact is well summarised within the original quotation. In evaluating the significance of this, it is important to understand the extent of the influence identity politics has currently. The prevalence of identity aligns closely with the ways in which it has become heavily politicised and divisive. The most essential of these is ideological diversity- another by product of democracy- which, by its very nature, brings disruption to the unquestioned sense of national or regional belonging one would have had in the past, and so people look to protect their interests by aligning themselves with those who agree with them. In asking where the future of identity lies, the answer may be in the master-slave dialectic, which shows the instability of the power of the majority, and so the possibility for a revolution of identity to allow recognition and, indeed, for the withdrawal from the common and distinguishing of self to be a celebration rather than a controversy.

Bibliography

Oxford Dictionaries (2019). *Definition of identity in English by Oxford Dictionaries*. [online] Available at: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/identity>

Descombes, V. (1980). *Modern French Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹² wikipedia.org, 2017

¹³ OUPblog, 2018

¹⁴ Descombes, 2016

¹⁵ Fukuyama, 2018

Kojève, A. (1969). *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*. Basic Books.

Phelan, S. and Kinsella, E. (2009). *Occupational Identity: Engaging Socio- Cultural Perspectives*. *Journal of Occupational Science* [online] Available at: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.870.5129&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

Wikipedia (2019) [online]. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_law_on_secularity_and_conspicuous_religious_symbols_in_schools

Youtube (2016). *France's burkini ban: Identity politics goes to the beach (part 1)*. FRANCE 24 English [online]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hvy2QdN_ACg&t=87s

Wilde, O. (2004). Available at: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/604387-know-thyself-was-written-over-the-portal-of-the-antique>

Bovey, A. (2015). British Library. *Peasants and their role in rural life* [online]. Available at: <https://www.bl.uk/the-middle-ages/articles/peasants-and-their-role-in-rural-life>

Taylor, A. (2016). Washington Post, *47 percent of the world's population now use the Internet, study says* [online]. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/11/22/47-percent-of-the-worlds-population-now-use-the-internet-users-study-says/?utm_term=.3585b5f86cda

Pew Research Center (2017) [online]. Available at: <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/08/08/gay-marriage-around-the-world-2013/>

Wikipedia (2019) [online]. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_language_in_Canada

Woolard, K (2018). OUPblog. *Catalan language, identity, and independence* [online]. Available at: <https://blog.oup.com/2018/01/catalan-language-identity-independence/>

Descombes, V. (2016). *Puzzling Identities*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Fukuyama, F. (2018). *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*. United States of America: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Downham, C, (2012). *Britain's Medieval Identity Crisis* [online]. Available at: <https://www.historyextra.com/period/medieval/britains-medieval-identity-crisis/>

Youtube (2018). *Are identity politics dangerous?* The Economist [online]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cl-27JjK-l>

The-Philosophy.com (2019). *A Philosophical History of Identity* [online]. Available at: <https://www.the-philosophy.com/a-philosophical-history-of-the-identity>

Youtube (2018). *Francis Fukuyama on the rise of identity politics* [online]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1_HNcSpBNs

Burns, T. (2006). *Hegel, Identity Politics and the Problem of Slavery* [journal]. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Tony_Burns3/publication/248946033_Hegel_Identity_Politics_and_the_Problem_of_Slavery/links/594bbde2458515e703488a7b/Hegel-Identity-Politics-and-the-Problem-of-Slavery.pdf