Identity Destabilised

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Living in an Overheated World

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1. Introduction

The Art of Belonging in an Overheated World

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Identity and modernity; globalisation, culture and identity; changing identities in the (post-)modern world; cultural creolisation and the politics of identity; ambivalence and fundamentalism; identity, gender and power; intersectionality; social identity, cultural identity, gender identity, ethnic identity, sexual identity, national identity, class identity, regional identity, linguistic identity, the hybridisation of identities and the essentialisation of hybridity. For a while in the 1990s, the concept of identity seemed to be everywhere. It has subsequently faded away somewhat as a keyword in the social sciences, which is to be regretted, since we live in a time when good and focused research on social identification is acutely needed. The need for the term identity is possibly even more pressing today than in the last century, if the high-speed transformations we have witnessed in a number of locations across the globe over the last few years are any indication at all. In a fast changing world with rapidly increasing connectivity and mobility, with mounting environmental challenges, rapid economic transformations and the rise of often virulent nationalisms, forms of belonging to places, groups or communities are being challenged in new ways that social scientists arguably still need to have a language for.

Although it might seem that though the intellectual energy of the concept of identity was spent after the turn of the millennium, it cannot be denied that people in otherwise very different societies continue to raise strikingly similar questions about who they are and what this entails. In rapidly changing surroundings, the answers are fraught with controversy, often pitting ambivalence and doubt against withdrawal and the reassertion of boundaries.

This book represents an approach to identity which aims to take previous research a step further. Shifting, multiple, contested and unstable social identities that hold out a promise as the basis of a meaningful sense of belonging will be at the centre – identities which we view through a particular lens, namely that of accelerated change. It is as if modernity shifted into a higher gear towards the end of the twentieth

century (Eriksen 2014, 2016). Phenomena that led to rapid changes in the postwar decades – migration, urbanisation, tourism, communication technology – are changing even faster in the 2010s. Adjusting to new circumstances is therefore necessary, and several options are available. To use Alfred Hirschman's famous tripartite classification of strategies in organisations (Hirschman 1971): should they opt for exit (withdrawal into the secure and safe), voice (resistance and protest) or loyalty (adapting to the powers that be)? Or perhaps a pragmatic blend of the three? And how can a world that has been ripped apart, whether because of industrial development, migration or the expansion of finance capital, be patched together again so that it appears meaningful and secure? How can continuity with the past be created in a convincing way when change is taking place at enormous speed? And in what ways do global crises influence forms of belonging and the sense of self? That is what this book is about, and we now proceed to presenting some of the main themes that, in our view, should be explored in an updated anthropology of identity.

OVERHEATING AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

Seen from a bird's-eye perspective, it is difficult to deny that the early twenty-first century appears to be an unusually hectic and restless period in the history of humanity. There seems to be rapid change everywhere. Ranging from foreign direct investment and the number of internet connections to global energy use, urbanisation in the global south and increased migration rates, rapid transformations are having impacts on social life in many ways, and have in some respects visibly stepped up their pace only since the 1990s. Dramatic alterations to the environment, economic transformations and social rearrangements are the order of the day in so many parts of the world, and in so many areas, that it may not be an exaggeration to speak of the global situation as being overheated (Eriksen 2016; see also Spooner 2015).

Overheating may serve as a central metaphor for the current phase of globalisation. The term calls attention to both accelerated change and the tensions, conflicts and frictions it engenders, as well as – implicitly – signalling the need to examine, through dialectical negation, deceleration or cooling down. Generally speaking, when things are suddenly brought into motion, they create friction; when things rub against each other, heat is generated at the interstices. Heat, for those who have been caught unawares by it, may result in torridness and apathy, but it may also trigger a number of other transformations, the trajectories of which may not be clear at the outset. When water is brought to boiling point, for instance,

it actually changes into a different substance. In a similar fashion, we arguably find ourselves at a 'systemic edge' (Sassen 2014: 221) these days, with economic, social and cultural forms of globalisation expanding into ever new territories, often changing the very fundamentals of customary life for those who find themselves subject to the whirlwinds of change. These processes are not unilaterally negative or positive for those affected by them, since what may be perceived as a crisis by some could very well represent positive opportunities to others, and the potential for spontaneous transformative moments is always present. Even climate change is sometimes welcomed, for example in cold regions where agriculture becomes feasible, or in the far north, where the melting of the Arctic ice creates exciting opportunities for oil companies and may lead to the opening of new shipping routes. Overheating consists of a series of unintended, and interrelated, consequences triggered by global neoliberal deregulation, technological developments rendering communication instantaneous and transportation inexpensive, increased energy consumption and a consumerist ethos animating the desires of a growing world population.

Changes in economic, social and environmental circumstances are often perceived locally as being exogenous, in the sense that large segments of those societies affected did not initiate the changes themselves; indeed, while some local key actors usually collaborate in bringing about, and benefit from, these changes, a good number of people are generally left with the feeling that they were not even asked by anybody in power for their opinion. Such rapid changes in the social fabric may affect, challenge or – sometimes – strengthen people's existing perceptions of themselves, their social belonging, who they are and where they are going. Making social and cultural identities sustainable in a world where change is unpredictable, frequently exogenous and often resulting in unintended consequences can be compared to rebuilding a ship at sea. It requires flexibility and improvisation, or novel forms of boundary-making. Others may discover that they are committed to change in such a way that it is stagnation, rather than change, that challenges their self-understanding, or they may approach the transformations around them with a lack of care and a fundamental sense of indifference.

Some questions people may typically ask in a situation of rapid change are: How can I be the person that I want to be when there is so much change? What is the essence of being me/us? What are the forces threatening our ability to remain who we think we should be? What kind of changes do we embrace, and what kind of changes do we see as a threat? The work of tracing a line connecting the past to the future,

via the present, in a compelling and meaningful way, is easy when there is just repetition, but difficult when there is no clear script relating the past to the future, no story of either continuity or development which is persuasive. All the chapters in this collection engage with this problematic, from Drotbohm's study of migrant lives which are cooled down upon enforced return to a slow place, via Kearney's exploration of collective healing as a response to fast and catastrophic changes affecting cultural identity, Thorleifsson's study of the ongoing negotiation of identity in a contested frontier area and Martin's analysis of alienation among football supporters unsure of their identity amidst the transformation of their club into a global brand, to Banović's story about destabilised gender identity in Montenegro and Schober's 'navy nostalgia' in the Philippines, where the changes brought about by recent foreign direct investment makes indigenous people long for the 'good old times' when the US military was still around. Whereas MacClancy forcefully argues against frozen identities, showing how they are being resisted, Neumann takes a long historical view and points to how the flow of irreversible time is being punctuated by the construction of monuments creating a sense of stability, continuity – and collective identity.

The issues raised can be related analytically to the broader question of how social reproduction and social identity are related during times of dramatic change. If it is true, as we claim, that accelerated change is now being experienced across the world (although, naturally, in an uneven fashion in particular places, with some communities being entirely unaffected), then the actual reproduction of the social fabric of life – and its connection to the way people make sense of their day-to-day affairs – is a 'burning' issue for many. Social reproduction and its inter-linkages with identity may, moreover, be studied through the lens of more specific fields, from cultural reproduction to the reproduction of families, gender relations, class dynamics, ethnic divisions and so on, which are all affected by overheating. As Wimpelmann (this volume) points out, the emergence of new elites in Afghanistan has not eclipsed the old ones but led to a continuing tension, while Pijpers shows how the uneven speed of change in competing Sierra Leonean power structures exacerbates chronic tensions, leading to frequent contestations that boil down to the question of how livelihoods can be secured through identity claims made amidst accelerated transformations.

The term reproduction has played a central role in (neo-)Marxist debates about the meaning of work and labour. Marx understood labour as a key factor in the productive process, with his collaborator Engels (2010 [1884]) introducing an understanding of economic production that tightly linked it to the social reproduction of families. Engels's

understanding of the gendered division of labour, which shapes how men and women partake in economic activities, was later found to conceal more than it actually reveals by Marxist feminists. The reproduction of labour, Harris and Young (1981) argued, as important as it may be, cannot simply be conflated with the wider processes of social and biological reproduction that are undertaken within households, where a number of other non-economic societal values are being (re-)created as well. The old Marxist tension between production and reproduction was later developed in another direction in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977; cf. Robbins 2000: 42–65; see also Goody 1976). Bourdieu stresses the social and cultural dimensions of reproduction, with reproduction being turned into a concept that deals with the transmission of social formations from one generation to another. In Bourdieu's understanding of the term, there is some space left for transformations to take place *within* routine processes of cultural reproduction. Change, in his view, has usually been a gradual, subtle process confined by pre-existing structural confines.

Through his sweeping study of the cultural reproduction of classes in French society (Bourdieu 1984), however, Bourdieu was essentially investigating the postwar period, which fizzled out in the 1980s. During the last decade of his life, Bourdieu was in fact deeply troubled by the onset of neoliberal regimes in the European Union. He understood globalisation and the shockwaves that it produced in Europe from the early 1990s onwards as destabilising the at times deeply oppressive, but at least *predictable* regimes of reproduction that he had studied for most of his academic career. With Bourdieu lamenting the end of the modernist era in his last important book (Bourdieu et al. 2000), one cannot but wonder what the French sociologist would have made of the changes unfolding since his death, an era during which the social, cultural and economic reproduction of people's life-worlds in many places has become ever more destabilised, with concepts such as neoliberalism, Anthropocene and the precariat having rapidly become buzzwords in academic and intellectual discourse.

Since the early 2000s, the concept of identity, which we seek to bring into conversation with local social reproduction and large-scale change, has become increasingly contested in the social sciences, with Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper arguing, at the turn of the millennium, that the social sciences might actually be better off without identity as part of its analytical toolbox (Brubaker & Cooper 2000; cf. MacClancy, this volume). At the same time, the everyday, emic usage of identity as a category of practice, an existential discourse, a feature of commercial life and an important, sometimes virulent form of politics, has spread

to such an extent that 'identity' has reached near universal currency in the way social relations are made sense of in the world: from Peru to the Philippines, from Norway to Montenegro, the tendency is for people to decipher their collective plights, fortunes and futures through the lens of social identity (see e.g. Brandstädter et al. 2013; Jenkins 2014). Since it is obvious that we need to retain a concept for the analysis of these significant phenomena related to people's collective views about themselves and others, we shall argue for an understanding of the term inspired by Reinhard Koselleck's conceptual history approach. If identity is one of the key *Grundbegriffe* (basic concepts) of our times, then its very contestedness, ambiguity and historically shifting meaning attest to the fundamental role it continues to play in people's understandings of themselves. Through his meticulous tracing of concepts through their historical transformations, Koselleck (2002) showed that basic concepts are inherently contradictory and multi-layered, and that they acquire new meanings, particularly during tumultuous times. This understanding of *Grundbegriffe* is supremely compatible with the way in which conceptualisations of identity twist and turn in the present era. To some of these changes we now turn.

BOUNDARIES AND FUZZY ZONES

Although the social science usage of the initially philosophical term identity began in developmental psychology (Erikson 1963), the bulk of the literature over the last decades of the twentieth century dealt with collective identities, often national, ethnic or religious. Whereas Gellner quipped that '[n]ationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist' (Gellner 1964: 169), his student A.D. Smith (1986) took a different position, arguing that the transformation of ethnic groups into nations was a continuous historical process, not a conjuring trick.

Gellner and Smith nevertheless share a premise made famous in Barth's essay on ethnicity (Barth 1969a), as well as in Anderson's definition of the nation as being imagined as 'inherently limited' (Anderson 1983: 6). In all of these theorisations, identity categories were delineated as being *bounded*. While cultural meaning is often described through the concept of flow, thereby depicted as continuous, identity categories were seen as discontinuous and bounded (Eriksen 2015: 9). With the boundary understood by Barth as an 'osmotic' entity across which transactions, communication and even the flow of people could take place (Barth 1969a: 21), the existence of a clear dividing line was nevertheless a premise for the study of inter-ethnic processes. However,

the very concept of the boundary has subsequently been problematised in a number of ways.

First, as argued by A.P. Cohen (1994), the concept of the *frontier*, seen as an ambiguous zone of negotiation, may in many cases be a more apt metaphor than the more rigid notion of the boundary. Indeed, the idea that ethnic groups are actually firmly bounded may be seen as an involuntary expression of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), using the nation-state and its fixed borders as a template for sub-, non-, trans- and pre-national groups. Although few of the chapters in this volume explicitly deal with frontier areas (Thorleifsson's is the most obvious example), they all interrogate the boundary as such, since it is being destabilised on the ground by uneven processes of change.

Second, as pointed out by Fardon (1987) and others, in many parts of the world the bounded ethnic group was often a colonial invention. Precolonial groups were often more fluid and overlapping than the groups emerging from population censuses and modern state-building.

Third, research on transnationalism (Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Olwig 2007) has shown that migrants often have an ambiguous national and local identity, with consequences for their ethnic identity. Many have economic and social obligations in two or more locations, bringing with them novel emotional attachments and identifications as well. In the second and third generation, this kind of complexity is further accentuated, as many have scarcely even visited their ancestral homeland. Some have intermarried. Some have changed their language or religion, food habits, body language and dress. Many actively resist being 'boxed' into a fixed category.

Fourth, there has been an increased empirical interest in the frontier zones of collectivities, where identity is precarious and contestable. Echoing the effects of the poststructuralist turn in gender studies, students of ethnicity are now likely to discover relatively permanent frontier areas where persons can be identified as neither/nor or both/ and. In the Caribbean, people of mixed African and European origins hold such an ambiguous position, as do people of mixed Indian and African origins. Sometimes spoken of as 'ethnic anomalies', people with a complex and contestable ethnic identity may form a substantial part of a population, although few are as extreme as the golfer Tiger Woods, who once described himself as Cablinasian, 'a mixture of Caucasian, Black, north American Indian and Asian' (Jenkins 2002: 115).

By concentrating on the core actors of collectivities, those who engage in the politics of culture and identity, classic ethnicity studies tended to overlook the often substantial numbers of persons at the margins. The increased interest in the fuzzy edges of collectivities has developed in

tandem with similar developments in other areas, notably studies of cultural mixing or hybridity (Werbner & Modood 1997). The concept of cultural creolisation (Drummond 1980; Hannerz 1996; Stewart 2007), moreover, denotes a particular form of cultural mixing resulting from sustained interaction between formerly discrete groups.

There is no intrinsic reason why cultural mixing should necessarily lead to the merging of collective identities. As research on ethnicity and nationalism has made abundantly clear, it is *presumptions* of difference, not objective differences, that keep boundaries intact. Indeed, as Harrison (2002) has argued, perceived similarities may sometimes be pivotal in spurring boundary work and inter-group competition. Groups are constituted as social entities, not as cultural ones. There is nevertheless an intrinsic relationship between social cohesion and cultural meaning, and when the social integrity of a group is threatened, the threat is often interpreted as an assault on the 'cultural stuff' believed to hold them together as a group. At the same time, perceived loss of cultural boundaries can entail a sense of impurity or lamentations over corruption (e.g. Schober, this volume) that may affect identification in two main ways: purification or affirmations of impurity. Cultural variation within any group is considerable, and cultural flows across boundaries ensure that mixing, in the contemporary world, is virtually everywhere. However, the impression sometimes given that 'everything' seems to be in continuous flux, that an infinity of opportunities seem to be open and that no groups, cultural identities or ethnic categories are fixed is caused by a conflation of discrete phenomena. Strong identities and fixed boundaries do not preclude cultural mixing. Ethnic variation may well exist without significant cultural variation. Processes of cultural mixing do not in themselves affect group identities and forms of boundedness.

This means that the ambiguous grey zones, which can be located in the space between categories and boundaries under pressure, are privileged sites for studying the interplay between culture and identity. This is not because all boundaries will eventually disappear, but because they are made visible through their negotiation and renegotiation, transcendence, transformations and reframing under conditions of accelerated change.

In a situation of overheating, there is often a tension between boundedness and openness. Many intellectuals have recently tried to think essentialism away, emphasising the flexible and fluid character of human identification – yet, it may seem that few are listening outside the seminar room. An eloquent expression of this position is that of Zygmunt Bauman: 'If the *modern* "problem of identity" is how to construct an

identity and keep it solid and stable, the *postmodern* "problem of identity" is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open' (Bauman 1996: 18). Perhaps many in societies with a strong individualist ethos and a positive attitude to change, such as the city of Gladstone described by Eriksen (this volume), evade strong group commitments, preferring to keep their options open for change and mobility, should an attractive opportunity present itself.

There may be sound normative reasons to endorse Bauman's position, but it is ultimately insufficient as a guideline for empirical research. Notwithstanding globalisation and the universalisation of some of the categories of modernity, differences and boundaries continue to exist. However, in a context of overheating, keeping the boundaries intact requires hard work and, as we have suggested, it is an empirical question to what extent maintaining strict divisions is even desirable.

GLOBALISATION AND IDENTITY THEORY

Many social scientists have questioned a widespread epistemic orientation called 'methodological nationalism' in recent years (e.g. Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002), which has entailed taking nation-states as 'natural' units of analysis in social scientific research. In light of this critique, it is now common to argue that the world has changed in such a way that the nation-state is no longer an appropriate synonym for 'society'. To a certain degree, Appadurai (1990), Hannerz (1996) and other scholars of globalisation are correct in arguing that identification and social alignments increasingly follow different lines than was formerly the case, since capitalism and modern communication technology have reworked the spatial dimension of human life. Robertson speaks of 'the present sense of the world as a single place' (Robertson 1992: 184), and Urry (2000) has suggested replacing the term 'society' with 'mobility' as a foundational concept for explorations of contemporary social life. Yet this view, despite its merits, overlooks how traditional forms of identification are in fact not being completely eradicated, but often only reshaped, albeit at times in often dramatic ways. What is needed is research on the dynamic relationship between openness and boundedness, quests for purity and celebrations of mixing, identities looking to the past and identities based on visions of the future. This is one major perspective that is being highlighted in the approach to identity based on the idea of overheating. Boundaries have been destabilised, but they are at the same time being restabilised. Urry's radical bid of replacing the term 'society' with 'mobility' would doubtless lead to an analytical focus quite different from a conceptualisation (still common in social science) that assumes,

almost in an axiomatic way, that stable societies are the stuff that social life is made of. At the same time, much would be lost if the concept of society and similar conceptualisations of stability and continuity were relegated to the dustbin of history, since it is an empirical fact that people all over the world seek stability, continuity, security and predictability (Eriksen et al. 2010), often by defending, creating or reconfiguring spatial belonging, border demarcations and collective memories anchored in particular places (Connerton 2009). What has been 'dis-embedded' is, in a multitude of ways, being 're-embedded'.

Less revolutionary, but still fairly radical, attempts to renew the conceptual apparatus of the social sciences can be found in works by, *inter alia*, Bourdieu (1977), Giddens (1991), Castells (1996–1998), Bauman (2000) and Beck (2009), who have suggested terms such as multidimensional social spaces (Bourdieu), the era of reflexive modernity (Giddens), the global network society (Castells) and globalised risk society (Beck) in a series of attempts to conceptualise the social in a time characterised by accelerated change and fuzzy boundaries. Notwithstanding their differences, their shared premise is the assumption that boundaries have been destabilised, are being questioned and challenged, and may be deconstructed, reconstructed or made to appear in new places.

Any complex society offers an almost infinite number of possible criteria for delineating subjective communities for whom the term 'we' can be used meaningfully: We, the supporters of the Labour Party. We commuters. We lesbians. We jazz musicians. We Christians. We copywriters. We Israelis. We women. Regardless of the many possible forms of 'we-hood', an underlying question remains, and is made acutely relevant in highly differentiated societies, namely which symbolic basis exists for a shared subjective identity encompassing a number of persons who can identify as a collectivity. In spite of decades of criticism of the methodological nationalism that social scientific works have suffered from, the nation still has, in many parts of the world, an indisputable and enduring ability to create strong abstract communities, quite contrary to what many theorists of globalisation predicted towards the end of the last century. It has its detractors, and it has its 'entropy-resistant' persons or groups who will not be part of it even if sharing the same territory, but national identities remain surprisingly strong in most parts of the world. The political struggles and controversies dividing many European populations these days do not mainly concern the nation as such, but how it should be delineated symbolically and demographically; who should be included, and on what conditions. The nation (or ethnic group) must now share the field of belonging with various other symbolic communities, many of them shifting, unstable and transna-