Unravelling the threads of identity

The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity

By Kwame Anthony Appiah

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The law of identity is a cornerstone of logic, with its simple assertion that everything is identical to itself. Nobel Laureate economist Amartya Sen had occasion to reflect over this as he once passed through British immigration during his tenure at Cambridge University. How did Sen have "Master of Trinity College" as his address entry, asked a rather interested immigration official, before volunteering an answer himself: It must be a close friendship. Sen begins his 2006 work, *Identity and Violence*, wondering if he really was himself.

Philosopher and public intellectual Kwame Anthony Appiah too comes to identity with first-hand experience of the many curiosities his unclassifiable physical appearance stirs up. Born to a Ghanaian father descended from a lineage of military privilege and a Scottish mother whose ancestry was traced to the 11th century, Appiah has been mistaken for an Ethiopian, an Indian, and much else. To classify a person encountered in a day's life is a very human tendency. And those who do not fit a mental map elicit curiosity and in some instances, explicit inquiry. Identity was once regarded as personal and particular, as with the protagonist of the Victorian novel *Middlemarch* finding herself cut adrift after disappointment in love. Yet her sense of lost identity only underlined that the 'self' for its affirmation, requires some form of acknowledgment by the 'other'. And it is not just the heart's yearnings that call for acknowledgement; everyday life depends upon it.

Modern societies function on a division of labour and one's position in this array of tasks is often one's identity. Appiah borrows the concept of "habitus" from the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to describe "a set of dispositions to respond more or less spontaneously to the world in particular ways, without much thought". It is something trained into a person, "starting from childhood" and reflected in public aspects such as accent, gait, and sartorial choices. Its other side is a notion of essences, a tendency to think of certain essential properties every person encountered in daily life, even its most trivial rituals, should possess.

Appiah tells the big story from a number of smaller instances, of individuals displaced from physical milieus they were born into, or seeking to deal with situations of flux, when notions of belonging were themselves changing. His own life offers a case study of being somewhere and elsewhere at the same time: born on the maternal side into a family governed by patrilineal inheritance and on the paternal, into a custom of matrilinearity. Sceptics about his parents' marriage worried not about racial but religious difference: one was a Methodist, the other an Anglican. Finally, their life together was sustained because faith was not just about a Sunday ritual, but something that "infused their lives".

In the book, Appiah devotes a chapter each to exploring five markers of identity: Creed, Colour, Country, Class, and Culture.

In religion, or "creed", he finds a shifting terrain of doctrine and practice, and a sense of belonging often dictated by choice. Scripture has never been a stable anchorage for practice. It has indeed been far from invariant, and its accretions through the ages suggest an adaptability to practical compulsions.

Some aspects of religious doctrine, read opportunistically, obscure a truthful perception of how communities seen as embodying a particular essence are in truth arenas of intense contention. The exclusion of women from public affairs has seeming sanction in Islamic scriptures, but is fiercely contested within Muslim communities. Scriptural sanction exists also in Judaism and Christianity, but rarely merits attention because it is not germane to essentialist readings in contemporary geopolitics.

Appiah's exploration of "colour" as a marker of identity begins with the 1707 transit of a five-year-old boy from the African Gold Coast (as it was then described) to a German city where he entered a princely court, secured tutorship under the polymath Wilhelm Liebniz, and grew to adult years as a renowned philosopher. His accomplishments led an eminent university examiner to describe the Gold Coast as the "mother of the most auspicious minds". Yet within mere decades, Immanuel Kant, the greatest Western philosopher of the 18th century – also a native of the German culture – could with little qualm proclaim blackness from "head to foot" as "distinct proof" of stupidity.

Late in the 19th century, the great Black scholar WEB Dubois spoke of the "colour-line" as the singular challenge of the century ahead: about securing to all, the "opportunities and privileges of modern civilisation". With that century over and another well underway, Appiah observes, the belief "in an essential difference between Us and Them persists widely and continues to be thought by many to be inherited". The colour line has become entrapped in the legitimation of Empire and the sustenance of power and privilege.

The exploration of the rubric of "class" in identity is a story told in part through the life of Michael Young. Having spent his early years in the outer reaches of the British empire, Young moved back to its core region but was stifled by the regimentation of school education. He flourished when transferred to a new-age school with a utopian model of education, and was taken into a family that straddled the Atlantic and disdained the class entitlements of the Old World while embracing the spirit of egalitarianism promised by Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal".

Gravitating towards the Labour Party after his university years, Young helped write a manifesto seeking a "socialist commonwealth" in Britain at the end of World War II, with all "material resources organised in the service of the British people". Seeing his dreams of a classless Britain recede, Young wrote *The Rise of the Meritocracy* in 1958, coining a satirical term that has, without any hint of irony, since entered the public discourse as a marker of a fair society, where "riches and rule were earned, not inherited".

Alarmed at the subversion of a term he invented to describe the negative consequences of entrenched privilege, Young sounded an explicit alarm in 2001:

> It is good sense to appoint individual people to jobs on their merit. It is the opposite when those who are judged to have merit of a particular kind harden into a new social class without room in it for others.

Appiah recognises that there are human tendencies behind the perpetuation of privileged lineages. He concedes that an eradication of the "overlaid grids" that emerge from the "distribution of economic, social and human capital", may be impossible. But some of the worst "injuries of class" he urges, can surely be mitigated "in the service of what we can call moral equality".

Appiah introduces perhaps his most engaging character in discussing "country" as a marker of identity. Ettore Schmitz was a person both in the Jewish faith, with German and Italian parentage. In the cultural cross-roads of Trieste, he was born a subject of the Austrian empire. Despite his German name, he was not deaf to the calls of a new national spirit emanating from Italy, a nation born the same year as he. When he began writing it was under the name Italo Svevo and his chosen idiom was the standardised Italian then evolving from a mosaic of dialects.

Trieste was annexed by Italy after World War I but Schmitz rebelled against the official demand to embrace the identity he had adopted as a writer. He was "a man without country or cause", whose life was "a dance with ambiguities". After fascism gained ascendancy in Italy in the years after his death, his Catholic wife was forced to register as a Jew and his sons met their death as partisans fighting the regime.

"Culture", the fifth of the tests of identity, is a term, like the other four, used in multiple senses without quite managing to identify core elements that define a people as similar. Calls to a presumed identity then have an element of artifact and invention about them, which could be used to divide. They could also be in Appiah's more benign vision, a reason for groups, "large and small, to do things together". In that sense they are the "lies that bind".

Identities are often forged by shared historical memories as also by mutually agreed pacts of forgetting. As Benedict Anderson reminds us in *Imagined Communities* (1983), this is a contrariness expressed in the glib assurance with which the 19th-century ideologue Ernest Renan could describe the French citizen: "The essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common and also that they have forgotten many things." He adds: "Every French citizen is obliged to have forgotten the St Bartholomew massacre and the massacres of the Midi in the 13th century."

What is curious here is Renan's reminder that every French citizen is obliged as a civic duty, to forget exactly those aspects of history he is recalling. These are the lies that bind. Yet in situations that weaken the wide consensus over pacts of forgetting, their divisive properties tend to overwhelm the more benign side. Escaping today's cauldron of identity conflicts may well be about accounting for and finally wiping the slate clean of the lies that bind. ■

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