

Identity and
Capitalism.

Marie Moran.



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC



Historicising 'Identity'

INTRODUCTION

Identity, particularly as it is elaborated in the associated categories of 'personal' and 'social' identity, is a relatively new concept in western thought, politics and culture. The word itself emerged in popular, political and scientific discourse only in the second half of the twentieth century, and was not discussed at all in these contexts prior to this. Until the 1950s, or even the 1960s and 1970s, there was no discussion of sexual identity, ethnic identity, political identity, national identity, corporate identity, brand identity, identity crisis, or 'losing' or 'finding' one's identity – indeed, no discussion at all of 'identity' in any of the ways that are so familiar to us today, and which, in our ordinary and political discussions, we would now find it hard to do without.

This claim that 'identity' is to all intents and purposes a new concept is controversial, and for many, will be counter-intuitive. Nonetheless, this surprising realisation is also very epistemically fruitful. Recognition of the historical novelty of our contemporary notion of identity sheds light on a number of debates and uncertainties about the experience and expression of identity today. Firstly, it helps resolve some of the key disputes animating social and political theory, including whether 'identities' should be conceptualised as 'essential' to individuals and groups, or socially constructed; and whether it is a divisive or solidaristic force in contemporary group politics. Secondly, it provides insight into the changing cultural and political formations of late capitalist societies, and how people are encouraged to experience their sense of self, and their relations to others in that context. In sum, it goes at least some way towards explaining why identity is both 'vital and problematic in high modernity' (Bendle, 2002: 1).

Quite how recognition of the novelty of the word, and indeed, concept of identity could illuminate so many complexities around the contemporary experience and expression of identity is not something that can be immediately

elaborated upon here, but will be revealed over the full course of this study. This first chapter begins this work, and in so doing, introduces the theoretical framework that allows us to trace the evolution of words and meanings in a social context in a way which sheds light upon both. Specifically, then, this chapter explores the emergence of the *word* identity into the contemporary political, popular and scientific lexicon, making the case that what we have witnessed is not the mere popularisation of an already existing word across new domains of practice, but the importation of an older word into these domains in a way which has involved a significant change of meaning, albeit one that was masked by the nominal continuity of the term. Ultimately, this chapter will argue that what occurred was not merely the popularisation of an older term, as is widely assumed, but the invention of an idea: the idea of identity.

IDENTITY: FROM ABSENCE TO PRESENCE

The assertion that ‘identity’ is a historically recent concept, and that the very notion of ‘identity’, as we now know it, was unavailable prior to the 1960s, seems far-fetched. It runs directly up against a commonplace treatment of identity today, which is precisely to view the very capacity to ‘have an identity’ as a basic and universal feature of the human condition. Identity just is who we are and who we know ourselves to be, whether that is in terms of our individual personalities and sense of self – roughly, ‘personal identity’ – or in terms of the social groups to which we are assigned or identify – roughly, ‘social identity’. How could that not be a historically persistent feature of humanity? Furthermore, it is hard to imagine a society, however primitive, in which questions of personal and social identity didn’t matter. As Calhoun comments, ‘[c]oncerns with individual and collective identity are ubiquitous ... [we] know of no people without names, no languages or cultures in which some manner of distinctions between self and other, we and they are not made’ (1994: 9).

It is from such a position that a number of commentators have criticised contemporary theoretical accounts that have assumed or proclaimed identity to be a historically recent concern that only came to prominence in late or postmodernity. (Giddens [1991], Woodward [1997] and Castells [2004] provide some well-known accounts of this kind of claim.) Jenkins, for example, urges us to be ‘very sceptical’ of the claim that ‘identity [has] become more marked and more significant over the last few decades’ and argues forcefully that concerns about identity are an endemic aspect of the human condition (2008: 20). ‘It is nothing new’, he writes, ‘to be self-conscious about identity: about what it means to be human, what it means to be a particular kind of human, what it means to be an individual and a person, whether people are who and what they appear to be and so on’ (2008: 36). He accuses postmodern theorists of forgetting ‘the fundamental importance of systematic inquiry into the observable realities of the human world’ (2008: 36), arguing that their position is simply

unconvincing. After all, he comments, 'didn't people know who they were, or think about it, before the twentieth century?' (2008: 35). This belief is supported in scientific and quasi-scientific ways in the vast amount of popular and clinical psychological accounts of 'human nature', 'human development' and human well-being which regard the need for and expressions of identity as universal and cross-cultural human concerns (Max-Neef, 1991; Sen, 1999; Akerlof and Kranton, 2000; Sen, 2000; Kail and Cavanaugh, 2010).

Similar critiques have been made of recent social theory which views 'identity politics' as a novel historical phenomenon. Calhoun (1993, 1994), for example, accuses those who claim that issues of identity are new to social movements of historical myopia. He challenges what he sees as the consensus view that issues of identity did not feature in 'old' social movements, providing evidence of the pertinence of issues of identity to nineteenth-century labour movements, and asserting that 'we need to recognize how profoundly early workers' movements were engaged in a politics of identity' (1993: 395). This view is supported by O'Neill (1998) and Aronowitz (1992), who suggest that questions of identity and recognition have always been central to labour and working class politics. Calhoun also argues that movements organised principally around identitarian social categories are not new: 'the notion that identity politics is a new phenomenon ... is equally false' (1994: 23), he writes, pointing to women's movements, the establishment of communes, anti-colonial resistance and nationalistic politics as evidence of identity-based social movements in existence up to 200 years ago. Others too have made similarly revisionist arguments, including Hetherington (1998: 30), who questions the assumption that 'identity politics' are emblematic of 'new' social movements, asserting that 'feminism, environmentalism, peace movements, anti-racist campaigns, animal rights movements and so on are not new; they have existed for at least two centuries within Western societies'. These theorists all effectively challenge the claim that identity politics are a recent phenomenon, by tracing the issues and movements we today label as identity politics back to the 1800s. "'Identity politics" and similar concerns', writes Calhoun, 'were never quite so much absent from the field of social movement activity – even in the heydays of liberal party politics or organized trade union struggle – as they were obscured from conventional academic observation' (1993: 388). Thus for Calhoun, while identity concerns are 'ubiquitous', '[s]ocial science has paid [them] only intermittent attention' (1994: 23).

There are also countless studies documenting the identity challenges of older civilisations, including the Greeks, the Celts and the ancient Mediterraneans (Gruen, 2011; Demetriou, 2012; Andrade, 2013; Gibson et al., 2013). Many more studies examine the politicisation of identity concerns historically, including, prominently, the identity struggles of colonised nations from the 1700s (Canny and Pagden, 1987; Katten, 2005), and the identity struggles of the women's movement and of women more generally in and prior to the twentieth century (the journals *Women's History Review* and *The Journal of Women's History*

return over 1300 articles between them on the subject of women's identities in historical context). Questions of identity seem absolutely central to early studies in psychology and sociology, as they grappled with the problems of individual deviance and normality, and the development of the individual in relation to her/his social environment (Ernst and Harris, 1999; Wagner, 2001; Thomson, 2006; Bourne Taylor, 2007). Jenkins (2008: 31) points out that 'an established sociological and psychological literature about identity goes back to the turn of the century and before: James, Cooley, Mead, Simmel come to mind immediately'. He also goes on to refer to the work of Locke, Shakespeare and Indian philosophers of the 1500s, admonishing that 'we sacrifice historical perspective if we neglect the variety of intellectual traditions that have reflected on identity: there is nothing intrinsically new about these issues'. Williams (2000) has made similar observations, and indeed, we might add to Jenkins's list of social and political theorists the work of Mary Wollstonecraft, W.E.B. du Bois, John Stuart Mill, Sigmund Freud, Frederic Nietzsche, amongst others, all of whom are widely agreed to have contributed significantly to our understanding of identity. Literary fiction too seems to be replete with historical examples of a concern with identity. In *The Nineteenth Century Novel: Identities*, Walder (2001) and his co-contributors discuss the significance and centrality of questions of identity in the well-known novels of Gustave Flaubert, Henry James, Bram Stoker, Kate Chopin and Joseph Conrad. Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, Robert Louis Stevenson and numerous others are also regularly announced to have written intensively on the subject of identity (cf. Benjamin, 1993; Cornes, 2008; Strong, 2008), with Cornes (2008: 5) positing that this literature reflected 'an obsession with individual identity [that] pervaded Western world thinking in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries'. Meanwhile, undergraduate and postgraduate courses routinely offer modules on identity in nineteenth-, eighteenth- and even seventeenth-century fiction.

However, closer reading of these original texts reveals the startling fact that none of these theorists, scientists, activists or writers credited with discussing or explaining identity ever actually used the word identity themselves. Though the term appears in more recent discussions, summaries and reviews of their work, this is typically without any acknowledgement or awareness of the fact that the original authors did not themselves deploy the term in the manner in which it is used today. This is not to suggest that the word identity was *never* used in any of these texts – it was. Crucially, however, *it was used in a very particular sense*, and indeed, what we would now see as a very narrow sense, to mean the sameness of an entity to itself, or the sameness of an entity over time. Consequently, almost without exception, where the term 'identity' does appear in these texts now assumed to be 'about' identity, it is incidental, and never the subject of any substantive discussion in itself. The only place a discussion of identity appears as a substantive topic in itself prior to the 1950s is in studies in analytical philosophy, where philosophers puzzled over the persistence and sameness of an entity – whether human or inanimate – over time. The connection between

this narrow sense and the later uses with which we are now familiar will be elaborated in Chapter 2. But for now, the important point is that those writers, theorists and scientists who we now believe to have discussed questions of personal and social identity as we now know and use the concepts never, in fact, discussed identity at all.

Contemporary scepticism of such a claim runs deep, so let us consider some specific examples, beginning with the fields of psychology and sociology with which discussions of identity are often associated. Freud has been identified by the Oxford University Press (2008) as a key theorist of identity – ‘there is little doubt’, they tell us, but ‘that he has radically altered how modern people think about themselves and their identity’ – yet a comprehensive search of his entire volume of work reveals only a few uses of the term identity. In each case, it is not the contemporary sense of the term that we find, but the older sense of ‘the sameness of an entity to itself’.¹ So for example, we see Freud (1920: 61) use the phrase ‘identity of perception’, which he explains as ‘a repetition of that perception which is connected with the fulfilment of the want’, thereby using ‘identity’ to indicate an *equivalence* between perception and want, and not ‘identity’ as we now know it. Indeed, Erik Erikson, who could conceivably claim credit for being among the first to use the term identity as we now understand it, writes, ‘First a word about the term identity. As far as I know Freud used it only once in a more than incidental way, and then with a psychosocial connotation’ (1959: 109). Introductory textbooks in the fields of psychology and sociology regularly make a similar mistake where they cite Charles Cooley, George Herbert Mead and William James for their important contributions to our modern understandings of identity (Hall, 1992; Kellner, 1995; McIntyre, 2006; Matthewman et al., 2007; Jenkins, 2008). Yet investigation of their key texts reveals that none of these authors actually use the word identity in the sense suggested by these contemporary reviewers. For example, in Chapter 10 of *The Principles of Psychology*, entitled ‘The Consciousness of Self’, James discusses the problem of ‘personal identity’, remarking that ‘ever since Hume’s time, it has been justly regarded as the most puzzling puzzle with which psychology has to deal’ (1890: 334). However, it continues to be the problem of the sameness or the persistence of the self that James discusses in this context – and though arguably James develops and provides a more social understanding of this abstract philosophical problem, he clearly does not discuss identity in its fuller contemporary sense, instead defining the feeling of identity as ‘the experience that “I am the same self that I was yesterday”’ (1890: 332). He continues,

the sense of our own personal identity, then, *is exactly like any one of our other perceptions of sameness among phenomena*. It is a conclusion grounded either on the resemblance in a fundamental respect, or on the continuity before the mind, of the phenomena compared ... And accordingly we find that, where the resemblance and the continuity are no longer felt, the sense of personal identity goes too. (James, 1890: 334, my italics)

This clearly reveals that what is at stake here is an understanding of identity as the persistence of self over time. Similarly, a search of Cooley's *Human Nature and the Social Order* (1902) and Mead's *Mind, Self and Society* (1934) – both assumed to be centrally concerned with the sociology of identity – reveals no instances of use of the term at all.²

There are similar findings in relation to the subjects of 'race' and gender, with which the notion of identity tends today also to be closely associated. W.E.B. du Bois, who is so regularly credited with being a key theorist of identity that several books have been written on the topic, does not once use the term in his important work *The Souls of Black Folk*, which is widely understood to form the core of his contribution to understandings of identity (Nicholson, 2008). In his Introduction to 'W.E.B. du Bois: Of Cultural and Racial Identity', editor Robert Gooding-Williams (1994: 168) claims that 'Du Bois's writing continues to shape our own thinking about issues of racial and cultural identity. To engage Du Bois, then, is to engage many of the concerns, questions, and perspectives which animate contemporary debates about these issues.' In fact, it is incredible that so many reviews of du Bois's work cannot do without the term identity, even though the term did not appear once in his key texts they review. The same issue is evident in contemporary feminism which looks to its earlier or foundational tracts for evidence of formative feminist thinking on the subject of identity. For example, Gunther-Canada (2001: 4) argues that one of Wollstonecraft's great achievements was to 'envision an autonomous political identity for women', and to base her argument on an understanding of how the 'female identity' is formed through childhood. But the word identity is not used once in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Wollstonecraft, 2002 [1796]), nor indeed elsewhere in her writings (cf. Butler and Todd, 1989). Virginia Woolf is also widely imagined to have confronted the problem of female identity, as indicated by Marina Benjamin (1993: 1) when she chooses to open the first chapter of her work, *A Question of Identity: Women, Science, and Literature*, with the following excerpt from Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*:

Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could hardly spell, and was the property of her husband.

Yet even though this passage is the opening piece in a chapter also entitled 'A Question of Identity', it does not seem to strike the author as strange that Woolf herself does not use the word identity in order to address the 'woman question', either in the cited passage or elsewhere in *A Room of One's Own*.

More broadly, there is a striking absence of the term identity from that nineteenth-century literary fiction which is now also widely assumed to be about identity. Despite explicit claims to the contrary, there is no evidence of the word identity in any of those 'great' nineteenth-century 'identity' novels like Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, Chopin's *The Awakening* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Similarly, when Jenkins refers us to a key passage of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* in order to demonstrate the 'long history' of reflections on identity, it is significant that the piece he cites does not contain the word identity at all, though Jenkins proceeds glibly – and blindly – as though it does:

All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts.
(Cited in Jenkins, 2008: 31)

And this pattern can be found yet more widely still: a search of the archival record of *all* published output for the UK and Ireland,³ which includes books, journals, periodicals and newspapers, reveals that the word identity appeared in the title or as a subject keyword in very few published items prior to the 1950s (featuring in an average of one item published every four years). Where it did appear, closer inspection reveals that it was not in the sense we now know and use the term, but again, in that older sense associated with analytical philosophy as, for example, in *Identity and Reality* (Meyerson, 1930), or (relatedly, as we will see), in the sense of a 'mistaken' identity, as in *Concealed Identity* (Richmond, 1938). Interestingly, once the term identity is excluded from the 'keyword' search, items which have subsequently been tagged by the cataloguer as being 'about' identity, but which did not use the term identity itself, are excluded. While this unsurprisingly throws up a smaller number of items, it also removes some telling items from the list, including *I Passed for White* (Lee (Pseudonym) and Hastings Bradley, 1955) and *The Ghetto* (Wirth, 1928). Questions of ethnicity, which are now routinely understood as questions of identity, were not, so it seems, understood as such a mere 50 years ago.

This dearth of discussion or even use of the word identity was evident in other domains too, as investigation reveals that politicians, marketers, activists and ordinary people engaging in day-to-day activities seem to have rarely used the word identity prior to the 1960s, and when they did, again, it was not in the way we use it today.⁴ Of course, this type of search is potentially boundless, but searches of political speeches, magazines and newspaper articles from the first half of the century give a good indication insofar as they do not yield any evidence of such use of the term identity. These findings are corroborated by a small number of other observers who have identified a distinct and noticeable absence of the term identity in public and political as well as academic contexts prior to about 1960 (Mackenzie, 1978; Gleason, 1983; Fearon, 1999).

Suddenly, however, all this changed. In the 1950s, books with identity in a sense we now easily recognise started to appear, as for example, *Identity and Interpersonal Competence: A New Direction in Family Research* by Nelson N. Foote and Leonard S. Cottrell Jr in 1955 (on the subject of interpersonal relationships), and *On Shame and the Search for Identity* by Helen Merrell Lynd in 1958. Lynd immediately cites Erikson and his use of identity in her introduction, writing that 'so great has been the impact of the changes of recent years that it is possible for an innovating Freudian psychoanalyst, Erik H. Erikson, to say that the search for identity has become as strategic in our time as the study of sexuality was in Freud's time' (Lynd, 1958: 14). The rest of the introduction reads like any introduction to the problems of identity today, making similar claims about its social and personal formations, and its great significance as a contemporary social concern. Interestingly, her comments here suggest that identity had become a common and familiar term beyond its academic use, something which was not reflected in the number of books published at the time of her writing. Yet this, too, would soon change. Erikson had not yet written his famous *Identity and the Life Cycle* (1959) but he had written *Childhood and Society* (1950), to which Lynd specifically refers. In the following years, an increasing number of books were published which deliberately deployed the term identity in the psychological sense set out by Erikson, followed in the early 1960s by a scattering of books that dealt explicitly with the subject of cultural or ethnic identity/ies, including *Politics, Personality and Nation-Building: Burma's Search for Identity* (Pye, 1962) and *Modern Islam: The Search for Cultural Identity* (Von Grunebaum, 1962). Much as a few isolated kernels of corn 'pop' as the oil heats in the pot, the examples from this 'warming-up' period were only an indication of what was to come. Indeed, the full evolution of the new senses of the word identity would be clustered together in a loud and chaotic eruption in the following decades. From this point on we see an exponential increase in the number of items published with identity in the title or subject matter, from the publication of an average of one item on identity every four years prior to the 1950s, to a peak of 533 items in *one year* in 2007.

As Figure 1.1 shows, after a steady increase from the 1950s to 1980s, the number of publications with identity in the title itself rose dramatically during the 1990s; 46 were published in 1990, 207 in 2000 and 237 in 2010.⁵ Others too have documented this huge explosion in the use of the word identity. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) have traced a vast increase in the number of people writing about identity since the 1970s, evident in the number of articles published on the subject and even the emergence of new journals explicitly devoted to identity. In his review of the growth of the usage of the term identity in the social sciences, Gilligan (2007) notes that while in 1970, 0.1% of all articles, books and book reviews indexed by the International Bibliography of Social Sciences (IBSS) had 'identity' in the title, by 1990, the figure had risen to 0.4%, and by 1999, had jumped to over 0.9%. Fearon (1999) also notes that the number of dissertations published with the term identity in the abstract

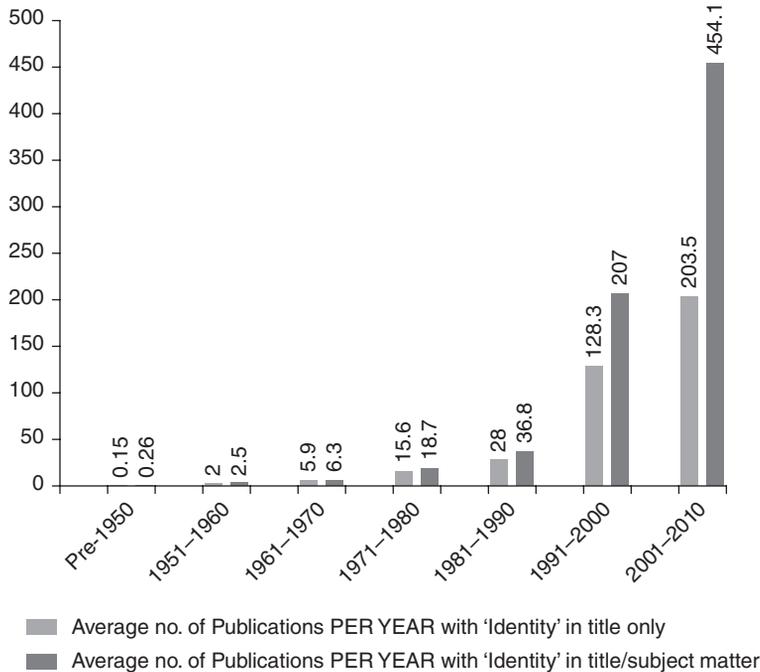


Figure 1.1 Average number of publications on 'identity' in the UK and Ireland per year

increased at an average rate of 12% per year between 1986 and 1995, while Gleason (1983: 918) claims that even 'by the 1960s, the word identity was used so widely and loosely [in the social sciences] that to determine its provenance in every context would be impossible'. As Brubaker and Cooper have pointed out, what is surprising about much of this work is that it has been carried out by people whose training and background lies emphatically 'outside the "homelands" of identity theorizing' (2000: 4), to the extent that the language of identity and identity crises can be found in the medical and natural sciences as well as the social (2000: 38, fn 15). There has been little or no abatement of academic work on the subject of identity since any of these measurements were taken, though there may be a decrease in the rate of expansion. As Alcott recently put it, 'identity is today a growth industry in the academy' (2006: 5).

Crucially, however, it is not just academics or literary figures talking about identity. As Brubaker and Cooper note, the language of identity has rapidly proved highly resonant across a number of domains, 'diffusing quickly across disciplinary and national boundaries, establishing itself in the journalistic as well as the academic lexicon, and permeating the language of social and political practice as well as that of social and political analysis' (2000: 3). Gleason (1983: 931) carefully documents what he sees as an 'enormous popularization' of the term in public, political and everyday as well as academic discourse from the

middle of the twentieth century, while Fearon (1999) notes especially the recent 'ordinary language' usage of the term, and calls for an analysis which is attentive to these uses. Mackenzie (1978: 15) even goes so far as to discuss the 'murder' of the word identity in 'semi-popular discourse from about 1971'. Within a very short space of time, suddenly everybody seemed to be talking about identity. African American, feminist and gay and lesbian movements declared their newly articulated pride in their 'identities', politicians discussed 'national identity', multicultural festivals celebrated 'ethnic identities', teens agonised over their 'individual identities' and middle-aged white men went through 'identity crises'. David Riesman, in the 1961 preface to his widely read book on changes to the American 'social character', *The Lonely Crowd*, referred directly to 'the current preoccupation with identity in this country' (1961 [1950]: lx). A few years later, Malcolm X spoke directly to his followers about the identity concerns of African Americans (while, significantly, as will be discussed further in Chapter 5, Martin Luther King never mentioned identity once). And in 1977, the black feminist lesbian organisation, the Combahee River Collective, produced the famous 'Combahee River Collective Statement', often credited with being one of the archetypal texts of 'identity politics', asserting:

We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us ... This focusing on our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. (1979 [1977]: 365)

Identity-talk continues unremittingly today. There is explicit discussion of identity in media talk shows, in self-help and popular psychological literature, in online profiles and in television and film. The word identity appears in multiple book and music titles,⁶ and films dealing with identity theft, swapping or loss have proliferated in recent years (*The Bourne Identity*, *Identity Thief* and the eponymous *Identity* are some recent high-profile examples). Online searches using the words 'losing', 'searching for' or 'finding' identity throw up a huge array of websites, blogs, adverts, online discussions and help-groups which claim to have an answer. This includes but is not limited to quasi-religious sites which proclaim themselves to be 'dedicated to providing information and resources to help people find their purpose and identity'; blogs about 'losing identity', in marriage, in mental health disorders, and in a range of common but traumatic experiences associated with family life, immigration, career and expected life trajectory; and a variety of sites providing advice and encouragement on issues of self-esteem and self-worth on the subject of 'searching for an identity'.⁷ Fashion and consumption is directly and explicitly linked to identity, with, for example, Gok Wan, the presenter of the highly popular British Channel 4 make-over show *How to Look Good Naked*, writing in *The Guardian*, 'Fashion

is about costume and identity, it's about being who you are ... fashion and image is so subjective, it's not down to my opinion. It's about confidence. It's about understanding your identity, and why you do certain things' (Carter, 2008). The language of advertising, marketing and the corporate world has also become heavily inflected with explicit references to identity, evident in the vast number of practical manuals and guides published on the development and management of brand and corporate identities, and indeed, the emergence of a veritable industry on the subject. The home page of 'identity builders' *Keen Branding* tells us it is 'dedicated to helping our clients in all aspects of creating, building, growing and fully realizing the potential of each corporate and brand identity through our specialized services for brand identity development, corporate identity development, [and] corporate identity design'. Other similar companies include *BIG – Brand Identity Guru*, *Identity Works*, *Brains on Fire* (which interestingly uses the language of social movements as well as identity) and *Kontrapunkt*, who claim on their home page that 'Identity is the core of business strategy'.⁸

IDENTITY: A SIGN OF THE TIMES?

How should we explain this huge explosion in use of the term identity across academic, political, popular cultural, commercial and literary spaces from roughly the 1960s? And what does it tell us about the longevity or otherwise of identity concerns? Those accounts which posit a new salience of identity in western societies, evident in the shift to identity politics, multiculturalism and identity-based forms of consumption in particular, tend to pay little attention to the explosion of use of the term itself. We might reasonably conclude that their assumption is that as the issue of identity has become more important, so too, obviously, has the language. People talk about it more, and theorists analyse it more precisely because it matters more today than it ever did.

Jenkins, however, turns this assumption on its head. He argues that in fact what has happened is that the 'identity theorists' have run away with themselves, projecting their own identity concerns onto the world they view. He attributes the ostensible new importance of identity to 'the conceits of western modernity, and its intellectual elite' who externalise their new-found fascination with identity concerns onto modern society more generally (2008: 34). Given the documented explosion of academic uses of the term, it is not hard to see why Jenkins might assume this to be the case. This does not, however, explain the popular explosion of the term, which Jenkins also acknowledges. Here he finds himself arguing that the growth in a popular discourse of identity is a function only of the development of information and communication technology. He claims that 'it's probably ... true that the *volume* of discourse about identity has reached new magnitudes, if only because global noise and chatter about everything has increased with the population and the widening

availability of communication technologies' (2008: 31). This provides him with a means of acknowledging a growth in a popular discourse of identity while maintaining that the true importance or value of identity has not changed. This argument is largely unconvincing, not least because it does not explain why other historically persistent concerns or experiences are not talked about to the same degree. It is also difficult to reconcile the claim that the contemporary salience of identity reflects nothing more than an increased popularity of the term with the growth in social movements organised around identity, and the clear increase in identity-based marketing and consumption from this time. Jenkins, however, is emblematic of a wider perception, and one with which I was regularly confronted in academic and lay circles while writing this book. And indeed, this interpretation is not surprising given the widely held contention that identity 'always mattered'. If this were the case, how could the huge 'noise' and 'chatter' around identity represent anything more than its popularisation as a word?

These two readings of the contemporary salience of identity are dominant today – either identity matters now more than it ever did, and its prominence in contemporary discourse reflects this; or identity has always mattered, but we are simply – for better or worse – paying it increased attention. What both perspectives miss is the key point established here: it is not just that identity is now discussed *more* than it was previously, but that prior to the 1950s, identity was simply not discussed *at all* in the ways it is now. And what is important to recognise in all these academic, political and popular contexts is not just that the word identity was being used extensively where it had not been used before, but that these uses themselves carried a significant change of meaning. No longer referring simply to the persistence of an entity over time, or even to a quasi-legal form of identity as in a 'mistaken' or 'concealed' identity, what is at stake here are the two uses of the term with which we are so familiar today: 'personal identity', to refer to personality and individuality, and 'social identity', to refer to assignment to or identification with a particular social group. Thus, although from our current vantage point it is widely perceived that this contemporary emphasis on identity involves an *increase* in the use of the term identity, in fact what is at stake is a *new* and original use of the term.

This reveals that the non-use of the word identity prior to the 1960s in the contexts in which it is now used was not simply accidental but quite sensible. It was not simply that the word was not fashionable, or that we just simply had not thought to use it, but that crucially, identity did not mean then what it means now. Instead, those participating in social movements, writing about self and society, thinking about their relationships with others and their association with different groups, expressed their concerns in alternative terms – concerns which are *now* but which were not then axiomatically considered or explicitly expressed in terms of identity. So although Jenkins and others are right in saying that issues that we now associate with the idea of identity have always mattered politically and socially, the characterisation of these issues in terms of identity

is novel, and furthermore, involves a use of the word that is itself substantively novel. Thus in response to Jenkins's question, 'didn't people know who they were, or think about it, before the twentieth century?' the answer is: of course they did – but they did not frame or consider these issues in terms of identity. The same applies to the question of the persistence of identity issues in social movements – Calhoun and Hetherington are quite right to say that groups mobilised around questions of gender, ethnicity and nation for centuries prior to the emergence of a series of 'new' social movements around identity, but the fact remains that the protagonists did not explicitly consider these issues as issues of identity, nor did they, it seems, expressly identify membership of these social categories as particular *identities*. And although feminists, political theorists, philosophers, psychologists and social scientists have always, to a greater or lesser extent, been concerned with questions of self and society, groups and social categories, and our individual and collective self-understandings arising from each, it seems clear that they did not expressly regard these as issues pertaining to 'identity' until the second half of the twentieth century. The key point remains both that identity did not mean then what it means now, and that the issues *now* discussed in terms of identity are not in themselves either entirely new or newly important; rather it is their framing and discussion in terms of identity which is novel and widespread.

IDENTITY IN CONTEXT: A CULTURAL MATERIALIST FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

This important point has achieved very little recognition. Indeed, it is surprising that so many have puzzled over the 'problems' of identity, yet do not pick up on the novelty of the term or its uses, leaving it instead to three or four writers working at the fringes of the identity 'tradition' in the academy, namely, Mackenzie (1978), Gleason (1983), Fearon (1999) and Brubaker and Cooper (2000). (Gleason is a historian, famous for his work on the history of American Catholicism, while Fearon is a political scientist who has specialised in political violence and democracy – his article on identity remains unpublished. Mackenzie had a background in classics and political sciences, and never published again on the subject of identity. Only Brubaker and Cooper work within the 'subject area' of identity in the social sciences.) Furthermore, the fact that each of these authors has written on the subject in different decades, without any widespread acknowledgement of this novelty of the term in the interim, points, I believe, to the deeply entrenched notion that the term identity has always more or less meant what it means now, and that 'identity', as such, has always mattered.

Working against the grain of this common appraisal of identity concerns, these commentators represent a special case insofar as each of them recognises, as Gleason puts it, that '*identity* is a new term as well as being an elusive and

ubiquitous one' (1983: 910). However, despite this, it is the case that none completely grasps the significance of the word's proliferation and meaning change in its historical context – mainly, I will now suggest, because each continues to see the *word itself* as the problem. As Mackenzie puts it, identity is a word that 'express[es] everything and nothing about personal and social anguish in the last third of the twentieth century' (1978: 101). Recognising both its changing meanings and vast proliferation of uses across multiple contexts, Mackenzie and Fearon both encourage us to pin down or capture the meanings of the word. 'It would be a victory', says Mackenzie, 'if one could ensnare the concept, settle an appropriate use of the word' (1978: 102), which he attempts to do by mapping the structure of 'links and sequences' within which the word identity is used (1978: 104). Meanwhile Fearon aims to 'distill a statement of meaning of "identity" from an analysis of current usage in ordinary language and social science discourse' (1999: 2).

For Gleason and Brubaker and Cooper, however, this project is misguided. Given the level of 'generality and diffuseness' of the term, contends Gleason, 'there is little point in asking what *identity* "really means" when matters have reached this pass' (1983: 914). But it is Brubaker and Cooper (2000) who have put forward the most sustained attack on the word identity itself. In their paper 'Beyond "Identity"', they diagnose identity as an inflated and ambiguous concept that has lost any useful meaning. Tracing its diffusion across lay and academic contexts, they complain that we have arrived at a point where 'all affinities and affiliations, all forms of belonging, all experiences of commonality, connectedness and cohesion, all self-understandings and self-identifications' (2000: 2) are conceptualised in terms of the idiom of identity. Distinguishing between identity as a 'category of practice' – that is a category of 'everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors' – and as a category of analysis – that is, an 'experience-distant categor[y] used by social analysts' – they argue that its contemporary popularity as a category of practice does not require its use as a category of analysis (2000: 4). But this important point has not been recognised or heeded, they contend, as the everyday 'hard' or 'essentialist' uses of identity have been unthinkingly imported into the social scientific lexicon. To make matters worse, these 'hard' understandings are in conflict with the 'soft', 'constructivist' understandings currently in vogue in academic analysis, where the term identity has already followed its own complex internal development. For Brubaker and Cooper, then, identity refers to everything and means nothing.

Although they acknowledge the ordinary practical uses of the term identity as it is deployed by a range of lay actors 'in some (not all!) everyday settings to make sense of themselves, of their activities, of what they share with, and how they differ from, others' (2000: 4), these uses do not concern Brubaker and Cooper. Instead their concern rests with the analytical categories required to make sense of all those affinities, affiliations, self-understandings and self-identifications that are currently bundled together in the 'blunt, flat, undifferentiated', not to

mention contradictory, vocabulary of identity (2000: 2). They stress on a number of occasions that what is at issue is 'not the legitimacy or importance of particularistic claims, but how best to conceptualise them' (2000: 34). On these grounds, they argue that we should dispense with the problematic language of identity and replace it with a range of concepts better suited to the difficult analytical task of understanding how 'identity' operates as a category of political and social practice. They do not believe there is anything important going on with the reference to so many issues in terms of identity, nor indeed with the proliferation of practical uses of the term – for them, 'identity' is simply an analytical mistake.

In each of these cases, it is clear that the focus rests on the problematic relationship of the word to the concept. For Brubaker and Cooper, the word identity unhelpfully conflates too many disparate and contradictory concepts – our purposes are better served as analysts by eschewing identity and selecting some more precise and accurate words to capture the relevant concepts. Mackenzie makes this formulation of the problem explicit when he asks whether we should consider identity as 'a new label for an old concept? A new label for a new concept? Or merely a with-it word ... used not to convey meaning but to give tone?' (1978: 18). While each of these alternatives has a ring of truth, none completely captures what has happened with the emergence of identity as a term, since crucially, none acknowledges the changing behaviours and politics accompanying the changing use and meaning of the term. The meaning change in question coincided not just with a massive explosion of the use of the term but also with the proliferation of an array of actions, behaviours and interests to do with what we now understand as 'identity'. As will be explained in greater depth as the book proceeds, the word identity came to be used in contexts in which questions of group and selfhood were themselves becoming problematic – that is, in 'new' social movements around 'race' and gender; in the intensified contexts of consumption that have come to characterise the 'consumer societies' of contemporary capitalism; and in the widespread popularisation of psychology and the emergence of a 'self-help' industry. Thus, current uses and meanings of the term emerged at the same time as these political, social and cultural issues to do with questions and expressions of self- and grouphood became much more significant. This tells us that the word identity *as we now know it* came into being at the same time as the issues concerning the experience and expression of identity (or rather, the issues *we now* consider in terms of identity) became notably prominent in political and social life.

These contexts of use are at best overlooked in these explanations, as, on the whole, they do not take adequate account of the particular and changing circumstances in which the word identity came to be used. Brubaker and Cooper offer a token contextualisation, but their emphasis remains firmly on identity as a category of analysis rather than a category of practice. Only Gleason addresses this issue and these connections with any seriousness, as he turns, in the final part of his paper, to 'the matter of causes', and asks 'why did

identity so quickly become an indispensable term in American social commentary?' (1983: 922). He identifies the new prestige of the social sciences and the popularisation of Erikson's work on identity as key factors, but argues that the 'decisive cause' was the way in which the 'word identity was ideally adapted to talking about the relationship of the individual to society as that perennial problem presented itself to Americans mid-century' (1983: 926). His analysis, however, is mainly suggestive, and is stymied by his lingering belief that the word itself is a problem.

This inattention to the contexts of use is reflected in the curious dismissal of or disregard for the everyday uses of the term – or what Brubaker and Cooper refer to as the uses of identity as a category of practice. It is either seen as a relatively inconsequential offshoot of the academic development, as is the case with Gleason and Mackenzie, or is deliberately bracketed out of the analysis altogether, as is the case with Brubaker and Cooper. Only Fearon suggests that we should pay more attention to these everyday uses, arguing that 'Brubaker and Cooper and Gleason are giving up too soon on both popular and "popular academic" usage' (1999: 7). In this Fearon is right, but because he tries only to pin down what identity 'means' in everyday language, he remains trapped in the word-concept binary and pays insufficient attention to the context, tracing these meanings in abstraction from the changing circumstances of their use.

These issues are all connected. That is, this inclination to view the word identity as problematic is a product of a failure to properly contextualise its new and changing uses – a failure to look at the word 'identity' in action. For it is not alone a question of new or old words and concepts, but also a question of new and changing events, conditions and issues: the new use of identity is not simply indicative of changing meanings of a word, but this new use and these changing meanings are themselves bound up with a changing reality. Identity, I suggest, is not simply a new word to describe old issues, nor an old word invested with new meanings, but a word that carries and encapsulates a new way of thinking about and engaging with a range of social, political and human concerns, which in turn, changes and affects the concerns and the conditions which give rise to them.

A shared but hidden assumption of these theorists who recognise the novelty of use and meaning of the word seems to be that that to which identity refers precedes its naming (albeit in a messy and complicated way). Hence Brubaker and Cooper's admonition that 'people everywhere and always have particular ties, self-understandings, stories, trajectories, histories, predicaments', but it is a mistake to reduce all this diversity and complexity to the 'flat, undifferentiated rubric of "identity"' (2000: 34). Fixing the term by pinning down its meanings, or throwing it out and replacing it with other equivalent but sharper words, is seen to provide better access to the concept it is supposed to capture. Thus as Mackenzie grasped the issue, 'I realized that I was moving from word to concept; and that there were difficult conceptual questions, for which the word "identity" (whether personal, political or social) might prove as good a label as any other' (1978: 50). This book takes issue with this belief – identity is not just any old

word, or as good (or bad) as any other, but is purposive and active: it calls into being and shapes that which it seems only to describe. Or to put it another way, that to which identity now refers did not precede its naming in these terms. Consequently, and against Mackenzie's claim, no other word would do – and *the word itself*, properly investigated, reveals why this is so, as this book demonstrates.

For all these reasons I suggest it is most helpful to consider identity a 'keyword' in the sense intended by Raymond Williams; that is, as a word related in complicated ways to the changing social reality it at once attempts to describe and forms an intrinsic part of. In the important introduction to *Keywords*, Williams clarifies the special character of a keyword, which is that 'the problems of its meanings [are] inextricably bound up with the problems it [is] used to discuss' (1983: 15). These problems of meaning and the problems it is used to discuss are historically specific, and thus we would expect the list of keywords to change over time, alongside the changing cultural, political and social beliefs, values and problems of the moment. As indeed it does – the word identity does not appear in Williams's original *Keywords* (1976), nor the revised second edition (1983), though it appears in later emulations of his work (Wolfreys, 2004; Bennett et al., 2005).⁹ The foundational claim of *Keywords* is that language change, and specifically meaning change, is a part of, and provides insight into the nature of, social and cultural transformation. As Bennett et al. (2005: xvii) explain,

For Williams the point was not merely that the meanings of words change over time but that they change in relationship to changing political, social and economic situations and needs. While rejecting the idea that you could describe that relationship in any simple or universal way, he was convinced it did exist – and that people do struggle in their use of language to give expression to new experiences of reality.

In this way, and as I will explain, Williams turns ordinary understandings on their head so that what might otherwise appear to be problematic difficulties of meaning are revealed to be better understood as a solution, or the key to analysis and wider understanding. Thus where Brubaker and Cooper urge us to 'throw out' the word identity, on the grounds that it is confused and confusing, Williams's inclination is to find in precisely this semantic complexity a unique insight into the social changes with which the new and sometimes conflicting uses of the word are bound up. This 'cultural materialist' approach, then, is the approach I propose to take in investigating and explaining the contemporary salience of identity in western, capitalist societies.

CONCLUSION

The widespread and deeply entrenched failure, with the few notable exceptions mentioned here, to recognise that identity is to all intents and purposes a new

word – or more exactly, an old word used in new ways – rather than one that has simply and unproblematically increased in usage, reveals another, important set of assumptions that are key to the historical argument of this book. That is, the widespread assumption that the word identity always meant what it means now reflects and is the product of a deeper, underlying belief that that to which it refers – ‘identity’ as we now know it – always existed. This is the consensus view on identity: it tells us that identity concerns have *always* featured in human societies, but that in contemporary, western societies, these concerns have come to matter more, trumping alternative political, social and cultural concerns; that where identity was once peripheral, it is now central, and where it was once neglected, it is now prioritised – ‘in fashion’ so to speak. Where these dominant readings differ is on the extent to which they view the movement of identity from periphery to centre, from neglect to priority, as a product of ‘real’ social changes, or a new social scientific and popular fascination with all things identitarian. This understanding that identity, somehow, always featured, itself rests on the more basic assumption that the experience and expression of identity is a universal experience and expression; that ‘having an identity’ – whether stable and unchanging or complex and fractured – is a basic and constitutive element of the human condition.

Against this interpretation what this book shows is that identity never ‘mattered’ prior to the 1960s – at least not as we know and understand identity today – primarily because it didn’t in fact *exist* or operate as a shared political and cultural idea until the 1960s. That is, the very idea of identity, as we know and use it today, only emerged into the popular, scientific and political imagination in the second half of the last century. So far I have traced this emergence mainly in terms of the appearance of the very word itself across a range of political, popular, literary and academic sites. However, as I have argued, the word emerged into popular and scientific use precisely as the bearer of new meanings. It is these new and changing senses in which the word came to be used that I trace in the next chapter. But more than this, developing a cultural materialist perspective means viewing changing meanings as intrinsically part of the social context in which they are expressed, utilised and which they shape. More formally, a key principle of the paradigm of cultural materialism is that the emergence of significant social concepts – keywords – cannot be understood separately from the cultural, political and economic contexts in which they emerge. It is only in exploring these contexts of emergence and use that we can fully understand the power of identity today. And as we will see, many of these contexts are deeply connected to the cultural political economy of capitalist societies. In particular, as I will show, changes around consumption patterns and opportunities for marking distinction or sameness, and changes in the forms of politics that characterise these societies, both provided the context and created the need for the idea of identity as we now know it. But that is to jump ahead. Before exploring the idea of identity in context, we must identify and understand its changing meanings, as it is these meanings which provide

the cipher to the social changes captured, carried and propagated by the idea of identity in capitalist societies. This is the subject of Chapter 2.

Notes

1. Searches of the original German texts as well as their English translations similarly reveal little or no evidence of the word 'identität' – which translates directly as 'identity' – see <http://www.gutenberg.org> and <http://users.rcn.com/brill/freudarc.html>.
2. The single use of the word identity in Cooley clearly indicates that it is identity as sameness that is at stake: 'We cannot feel strongly toward the totally unlike because it is unimaginable, unrealizable; nor yet toward the wholly like because it is stale – identity must always be dull company' (Cooley, 1902: 153).
3. Trinity College library is a 'copyright library' and thus holds legal deposit for all 'books' (including journals, periodicals and newspapers) published in the UK and Ireland. The 'Stella' search engine made available by the library sorts publications within this database by number of items (with the key search term) by year.
4. There were some occasional and incidental uses, as, for example, with the phrase 'an identity of interests' – a use which persists though which hardly springs immediately to mind in discussions of 'identity' today.
5. Although this method of searching is clearly not comprehensive, nor entirely satisfactory in other ways, it does nonetheless indicate the general movement and change in the use of the term identity over the years in question. Similar searches carried out using Google Books or Amazon reveal similar shifts, but are harder to quantify reliably as Amazon in particular is sales-based, and often thus lists duplicates of the same book where it is retailed by different sellers.
6. On 24 June 2009, for example, a search for 'identity' on Amazon.com threw up 500,564 books, 1602 DVDs and 2102 MP3 downloads tagged with the label identity.
7. See, for example, <http://www.seekingpurpose.com/>, <http://aishaiqbal.blogspot.com>, <http://www.livingmanicdepressive.com/>, <http://www.experienceproject.com/groups/Feel-As-If-I-Am-Losing-My-Identity/3961> and <http://www.tolerance.org/handbook/beyond-golden-rule/searching-identity>.
8. The website for these companies are available at <http://www.keenbranding.com/>, <http://www.brandidentityguru.com/>, <http://www.identityworks.com/>, <http://www.brainsonfire.com/> and <http://www.kontrapunkt.dk/>.
9. Williams himself acknowledged the intrinsically open-ended character of his project, and approved of the addition of new keywords with changing times, as specifically indicated by the inclusion of blank pages at the end of each published copy.