**Promoting Conflict or Peace through Identity**


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Promoting Conflict or Peace through Identity is a collection of ten essays that examine the means by which group identities are constructed and how such identities can be employed in order to facilitate either conflict or peace. The contributors represent a variety of disciplines—sociology, psychology, political science, journalism—and provide case studies covering all regions of the world, from Melanesia and Africa to Europe and the Americas.

A favorite trope of science fiction writers consists in stranding individuals from warring empires or species upon an uninhabited planet, where they inevitably learn to overcome their differences as they work together to survive, recognizing the common humanity (sic) they share. This trope depends upon the conviction that, in an idealized Rousseauan environment, people are able to shed the identities and prejudices foisted upon them by their respective civilizations and encounter one another through a glass no longer darkened by politics, religion, nationality, or race. In the end, after said folk manage to escape the planet of their captivity, they invariably pledge to carry this new spirit of understanding back to their own respective tribes or empires. The story often ends at that point, for the often tedious work of peacemaking usually does not provide the level of drama or excitement needed to entertain mass audiences.

The moral of the story invariably ends up being not that individuals must question any attribution of ‘enemy’ or ‘other’ applied to particular groups by a recognized authority; instead, we are given a pat message of ‘X are okay people after all’, which still leaves plenty of
room to disparage Y and Z, with whom one did not, after all, share the hardship of surviving on a desolate planet. Too, such stories usually envision identity as something that is charted along one axis, whereas human beings, at least, have multidimensional identities dependent upon sex, gender, language, nationality, ethnicity, race, sexuality, religion, occupation, education, and more—and even these are not hard-and-fast categories (what constitutes a religion as opposed to a philosophy? what constitutes an ethnic group?) but rather labels of convenience. Given the complexity of individual and group psychology, and the general unfeasibility of fashioning peace by strandng together representatives from conflict-driven groups one at a time, how then can we begin to understand the origins of conflict, as it relates to identity, with the aim of lessening violent conflict in our world?

This is the task taken up by editor Nikki Slocum-Bradley and her fellow contributors in *Promoting Conflict or Peace through Identity*. Slocum-Bradley opens up the volume by outlining some of the latest research into the study of identity and the ‘borders of the mind’, defining identities as ‘meanings—labels, categories, symbols, and so forth—applied to persons or other narrated actors in specific contexts’ (p. 5). After examining and dismissing rational choice, socio-biological, and Social Identity theories with regard to their explanation for conflict and peace, she advances as a more useful framework the constructivist approach, which holds that the ‘meanings of identities, including definitions of group membership, members’ values, attitudes, interests, and so forth, are constructed in discourse, that accomplishes social tasks’, conflict and peace being two such social tasks (p. 11).

The first four case studies deal with contestations within recognized nations and their occupied territories. Sébastien Dubois runs with the constructivist approach of identity by tracking the emergence of Belgium as a nation and the national narratives that have been employed across the Flemish-Walloon linguistic divide, illustrating how different interpretations of the past (e.g. Belgium arising from the struggle against various foreign oppressors) generate different collective identities. Ogoh Alubo does yeoman work in delineating the complex politics of identity construction (and the concomitant policies of inclusion and exclusion) in modern Nigeria, the government of which divides people into one of 374 recognized ethnic groups and then further bestows upon them a status of ‘indigene’ or ‘settler’ depending upon whether they reside in the recognized geographical homeland of their respective ethnic group. ‘In this way’, Alubo writes, ‘identity construction is based on a form of genealogy that privileges claims over a particular space within the state’, with the result that groups tend less to seek separation than they do to demand more money and attention from the federal government while seeking to deny others those same benefits (p. 45). Like Dubois, David Newman examines how interpretations of the past drive present conflict by reflecting upon the socialization of Israeli citizens, how authorities consistently link modern-day Israel with Biblical events to forge an
unbroken link between past and present so as to reify the righteousness of Israel's territorial ambitions; this drive has been met by a counter-hegemonic claim by Arab and Palestinian intellectuals, as well as a post-Zionist discourse that seeks greater entrance into the community of nations. Lastly, David Camroux and Don Pathan explore the Malay irredentist movement in southern Thailand. This conflict, the authors assert, is not merely another example of ethnic or religious separatism, for the categories of Malay and Muslim reinforce each other: ’In the case of southern Thailand, Islam simply provides a further ideological underpinning for the rejection of rule by an ‘infidel occupier’ of the territory of a Malay Muslim majority’ (p. 95).

The second quartet of case studies focus more upon the transnational expression of identities and the role this plays in cross-border conflict or peace. Editor Slocum-Bradley’s own lengthy contribution employs Positioning Theory in an analysis of identity construction along the US–Mexico border. Identities, she asserts

are the mechanisms by which duties and rights are allocated. Judgments about the fulfillment of duties and rights, in turn, have consequences for how actors are identified. While a storyline determines the relevance of the identities that can be evoked, the identities evoked influence the storyline’s plausibility. The social force of a (speech) act evokes identities, and identities evoked influence how the social force is made determinate. (p. 112)

A storyline which holds that Latino immigrants are seeking to re-colonize parts of the United States will thus position Latinos as criminals in violation of their duty to remain out of the country, resulting in a conflictual social force, while, for example, a storyline on the opposite end of the spectrum, one emphasizing the U.S. and Mexico working to build a hemisphere of prosperity, identifies Mexicans as neighbors who have the right to move freely across the border. Francesco Duina analyzes three regional trade associations (RTAs)—the European Union, NAFTA, and Mercosur—and the opportunities they provide for peace. Among the aspects of RTAs that seem to promote peace are the standardization of law across borders and shared symbols. She also insists that ‘transnational administrative building is giving rise to cadres of professionals who share similar viewpoints and beliefs about the world’ (p. 147) but seems innocent of the potential for conflict and exploitation such a development may foster, for not too long ago in the past Europe’s nobility conceived of itself as a single, transnational race, united with each other in their collective superiority over the peasantry, and yet the existence of such ‘cadres of professionals’ who related to each other (and often were related with each other) across borders managed to forestall neither war nor the exploitation of the lower classes. A formal caution against regional planning comes from Fathali M. Moghaddam in an analysis of the emergence of a transnational Shi’a region following the 2003 invasion of Iraq by American forces. As Moghaddam notes, ‘regional planning tends to work on the assumption that religious identities (like identities based upon other cultural aspects) are not major factors in
economic development’ (p. 180), and yet a worldwide perception by Muslims that they are collectively under attack, combined with rivalries on the local, regional, and international level, have all made possible the emergence of a Shi’a consciousness as a counterpoint to both Sunni and Western advances. Closing up this second quartet is M. Anne Brown’s piece examining how Melanesia is represented in the Western media, with a special focus on how such media representations emphasize the supposed ‘tribal’ nature of the populations as well as the fragile nature of their political institutions. Contrary to the practice of viewing strong, local, Melanesian identities as standing in the way of economic and political modernization, Brown asserts the need of understanding the Pacific Islands as ‘hybrid political orders’ undergoing the same political and economic experimentation that is occurring across the globe.

In her closing chapter, editor Slocum-Bradley offers some meditations upon the means by which identity constructions can promote conflict or peace. She notes that identity can emerge at any three points in a conflict: 1) establishing a meaning system, 2) interpreting transgression, and 3) redressing an alleged transgression. A part of this is the ascription, or lack thereof, of intentionality to the ostensible transgressor. Indeed, as Patrick Colm Hogan pointed out in Understanding Nationalism: On Narrative, Cognitive Science, and Identity (2009), American nationalist discourse following September 11, 2001, held that Al-Qaeda and its allies exercised free will in carrying out their attacks—that is, their actions were stripped of any historical context and therefore perpetrated out of sheer evil—while the American response was compelled by this initiating act: ‘Thus, the apparent immorality of the response does not taint the group responding, but accrues to the immorality of the initiating act’ (Hogan 2009, p. 173). Slocum-Bradley’s insight that ascriptions of intentionality can pave the way for either conflict or peace is a key point, as is her assertion that the identity evoked plays a large role in the limiting or expansion of conflict. In the United States at present, the inability of large segments of the population to understand the September 11 hijackers as anything other than ‘Muslim’ has led to a popular equation of ‘Muslim’ with ‘terrorist’ and precipitated violence against Muslim people and institutions across the country. In contrast, the hijackers, given the multidimensional nature of human identity, could also be understood as men, monotheists, and world travelers, but so far suspicion has not been directed against these groups as groups—or, at least, not against the first two.

Though the forces of globalization are often referenced throughout Promoting Conflict or Peace through Identity, there is little acknowledgement that the modern project of globalization, by reducing the salience of the nation-state via the quantum uncertainty of international finance and transactions, has fostered across the world what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai calls an ‘anxiety of incompleteness’. ‘No modern nation’, he asserts, ‘is free of the idea that its national sovereignty is built on some sort of ethnic genius’, and the social and political uncertainty arising from a regime of
globalization can lead populations who identify with the ‘ethnic genius’ to ascribe as the source of this uncertainty the failure of that genius to manifest itself in totality; in such a state, numerical majorities can become predatory and ethnocidal with regard to small numbers precisely when some minorities (and their small numbers) remind these majorities of the small gap which lies between their condition as majorities and the horizon of an unsullied whole, a pure and untainted national ethos. (Appadurai 2005, pp. 3, 8)

Tying the forces of globalization to the issue of identity, philosopher Arne John Vetlesen concludes that the advance of liberal and neoliberal systems that are part and parcel of globalization has taken the issue of identity ‘out of the powers of tradition, history, and communality and placed it instead, existentialist-like, as a task and burden on the shoulders of the single individual’, who is thus transformed into Homo optionis, free to ‘stake out a life-course by his or her own choosing’ but also ‘more ruthlessly affected by macro-social forces (especially economic ones in the wake of globalization) he or she is dramatically dependent upon’. Vetlesen interprets both the Holocaust and the genocide in the former Yugoslavia as ‘protests against and negations of the development of political modernity in which identity is rendered optional for each individual’ (Vetlesen 2005, p. 162).

In contrast to these skeptics, most of the contributors to Promoting Conflict or Peace through Identity view globalization as a means to reduce conflict within and among nations and groups: if more Americans understand their continent as a hemisphere of prosperity, for example, then the persecution of undocumented Latino immigrants might dissipate. This stress upon narrative or storyline correlates with the argument advanced by political scientist Marc Howard Ross that the development of inclusive narratives is a crucial part of the peace process. However, he asserts that the goal should not be to craft a single, widely accepted narrative that serves all but rather ‘to find sufficient common ground and tolerance to allow the groups not to feel threatened by differences in how they see the world. Paradoxically, doing this successfully often requires that differences be acknowledged and explored rather than swept under the rug’ (Ross 2007, p. 47). There is a certain irony at work in this book, for though M. Anne Brown argues against viewing Melanesians as ‘tribal’, many contributors to this volume ascribe some level of tribalism to populations engaged in ostensibly unprofitable conflict that limits their engagement with the globalized world at large. But peace may well depend, not upon the establishment of a larger metanarrative to which we can all subscribe, but upon minimizing those national and international institutions—the RTAs, the nation-state, transnational corporations—that profit by the mass ascription of identities upon target populations and, instead, develop a much more localist consciousness. By adopting a worldview wherein we experience each city or town not as part of this seamless whole called America or
Europe but rather as an entity unto itself, filled with people who adhere to their own customs and mores, we have a much more immediate understanding of the diversity of humankind and are more capable of interpreting it not as a threat to individual identity but as an inherent facet of the social world. It may well be the closest we get to reaching accord across boundaries without having to crash land on a distant, deserted planet.

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