

Working with Key Concepts in Cultural Studies: IDENTITY**Preliminary Reflections**

Identity as a philosophical concept (not as a concept of persons) has a long tradition.

Identity as sameness vs. difference (Aristotle)

"But we must examine whether the essence and each thing are the same or different. For this will indeed further the task of examining primary being [or 'substance']. For it appears that each thing is not different from its own primary being; and indeed that the essence is said to be the primary being of each thing." (Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Z 6 (1031a17-18)) (quoted from *Politis* 223)

Différance and the impossibility of sameness (Derrida)

"[...] in Language there are only differences.' [...] The first consequence to be drawn from this is that the signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences." (Derrida 9)

Personal Identity

The concept of personal identity has a number of related terms. These are differentiated by the discourses to which they belong. They also introduce *different types of differences* (they are part of different oppositions):

Term	Discourse	Difference is marked by the term
Identity	Philosophy, Law, Civil Society, Cultural Theory	Difference
Subject / Subjectivity	Philosophy, Law, Sociology	Object / Objectivity
Individual / Individuality	Philosophy, Sociology	Collective
Role	Sociology, Drama	Authenticity, the real Self
Person	Sociology, Law, Philosophy	Impersonality
Self	Psychology, Philosophy	Other

Identity as a Construct

Essentialism	vs.	Constructedness
"Everything has its essence."		"Everything is constructed."
Relevant tasks / questions: Find out about the innermost essence of a "thing," discover its inherent nature / its intrinsic core		Relevant tasks / questions: Find out about the social, cultural, political etc. practices that produce and (re-) produce a "thing"
Epistemological approach: <i>ontology</i>		Epistemological approach: <i>discourse analysis</i>
Investigation of "facts"		Investigation of "effects"

- In Cultural Studies, identity is not understood as an original and essential core of every individual, but as a "cultural construct".
- We are not "born" with our identity. The idea that one has an identity is acquired. It is the result of "techniques of the self" which one has learned from interaction with one's environment.
- The environment may consist of:
 - other people, [e.g. friends, family]
 - representatives of institutions, [e.g. teachers, doctors, police, government officers, therapists]
 - public figures [celebrities, artists, actors, politicians, athletes]
 - mediated 'fictional characters' in cultural products [e.g. films, ads, literature, art, songs]
- One 'is identified', or has to 'identify oneself', and one 'identifies' others (identity as attributed and adopted).
- *Identity effects* may be linked to certain material objects, characteristics, places etc. [e.g. sports car, walkman, ties, address, student ID, dialect, beverages...]

Identity Politics and "Strategic Essentialism":

Strategic Essentialism: Though people may be aware of the constructedness of identity they may for strategic reasons (e.g. community building/formation) propagate an essentialist claim for their identity (e.g. "black is beautiful").

Identity politics aim at changing social practices and use identity as a means of political organization through coalitions or alliances. Identity politics usually demands a right to be different and for that difference to be recognized as legitimate (strategic essentialism).

Questions for analyzing identity

- Whose identity is spoken of?
 - Questions of "Who am I?" / "Who are you?"
 - Who is this? (person, fictional character, etc.).
 - Who are we, who are you (plural), who are they? (individual vs. collective identity)
- Who assigns or attributes an identity?
 - Oneself or another?
 - Which agency, institution etc.?
 - Through what kind of procedure?
- How is difference marked?
 - e.g. one vs. many, old vs. young, male vs. female, etc.
 - personal identity; collective, gender, ethnic, national identities ...
- Which identity effects does a material create? How does something acquire a specific designation as opposed to / in difference to others?

Sources

Jacques Derrida. "Différance." *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1982 (1972). Print.
Vasili Politis. *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Aristotle and the Metaphysics*. London: Routledge, 2004. Print

Further Reading:

Stuart Hall. "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Eds. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay. London: Sage, 2002. Print. 1-17.
Stuart Hall. "The Spectacle of Otherness." *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Ed. Stuart Hall. London: Sage, 2003. Print.
Douglas Kellner. "Popular Culture and the Construction of Postmodern Identities." *Modernity and Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992. Print. 141-177.