Social Identities: Narrow and Broad, Exclusive and Inclusive, Firm and Fuzzy

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Disciplinary boundaries certainly have their reasons and advantages, for example, regarding the possibility to specialise and the common ground they create for on-going debates. But this comes at a price, as we all know. One is that I would probably never come across a piece of work like Dasgupta and Goyal's "Narrow Identities" (2019; henceforth DG) were it not for the kind invitation to participate in this (virtual) mini-symposium. I would therefore like to thank the organisers and editors of this issue, as well as the authors of the original paper, for the opportunity to raise an anthropological word in this context.

The paper sets itself the aim of explaining why people around the world tend to stress narrow or exclusive identities, such as ethnicity, when each one's personhood is composed of so many more distinctions. This is, indeed, a remarkable fact, and one with great—and often fatal—consequences. It is highly appreciated to see this approached in such a meticulous and consistent way as only economists tend to do. I write this as an economic anthropologist who has been working on identity issues for many years, and who is, in general, amicable to the rigour and logical derivation of mathematical models and causal explanations—more so, at least, than many of my colleagues.

Having said that, I was presumably not invited to simply back the arguments and conclusions made here but to take a critical look from a different theoretical perspective and methodological background. As indicated, some of these differences are disciplinary or terminological. To begin with, I fully agree with the authors that individual and social identities may be analytically distinct but always closely interrelated, and thus, should be looked at jointly. I also strongly agree with the point made in the very beginning that a person's identity has indeed many facets, such as the mentioned "language, personal interests, customs, religion,

and ethnicity” (DG 2019, 395; missing here are issues of gender and class, for example). Yet, when in later passages the word is about the multiplicity of identity, I wonder whether complexity would not fit better as a description relating to facets. All these various aspects do not stand parallel or in opposition to each other but, at least for most of us, add up to make us the personalities we are (Finke 2014). It took me also a while to grasp what the authors actually mean by narrow identities. But if it is the opposite of multiple, shouldn’t it be single identities, or if narrow, shouldn’t its counterpart be broad identities? Or inclusive and exclusive? And isn’t much of what the authors write about more the—often opportunistic—affiliation with particular groups and categories rather than an identity that tells us who we are or believe to be? Membership is not the same as identification, although the two may often go together. But, as said, these are terminological issues, not a question of disagreement on an argument.

Most of the critical issues I shall raise here have to do with assumptions the authors make; others point to neglected aspects that, for an anthropologist or social scientist, are essential to think about. Let me take them in turn.

I. GROUP SIZE

The problem of the paper starts with a couple of assumptions, not all of which are totally convincing. Yes, as the authors claim, the main function of identity seems to be for people to find their place in the larger social world, and to include guidelines on how to act accordingly as well as a commitment to do so. This, in turn, enables mutual trust and solidarity. I also follow the idea that people evaluate the pros and cons of joining or leaving groups depending on the respective benefits these have to offer. I am not so sure about the assumption that, all else equal, the larger one’s *own* group is, the better off one is. First of all, while this undoubtedly increases the chance to achieve common goods, in many situations, it also means sharing the booty with more members than one would want to, depending on what is at stake. If you want to save the world from climate change, the more collaborators the better. The same is not the case if you plan to rob a bank or win a Nobel prize. Therefore, in alliance theory and related bodies of literature, the trick of the game is rather to end up at the optimal size to just succeed rather than to maximise one’s followers (Schlee 2004). Building coalitions in many European parliaments is a telling example of that. The optimal size here is 51 per cent. This allows you

to assert your aims without having too many parties on board with their own interests and stakes.

In other cases, exclusiveness, or the strict limitation of membership in a given group, may be a much sought-after advantage, for example, in the case of aristocratic estates or religious factions built on ideas of purity and esoteric wisdom. Here, the smaller the own group the better, as long as this distinction towards others manifests in some sort of benefits in itself. In turn, narratives of the true faith being narrowly defined and only accessible for a small minority are of greater relevance here.

II. METHODS

A greater concern I have, and one which I presumably share with more or less all of my disciplinary colleagues, is about the methodology. Mathematical models are, of course, a perfectly legitimate way to look at the world and try to explain it. But they are obviously only one, and not the one that allow the most accurate and reliable predictions, in my view. I think as anthropologists we are not so much puzzled by the fact that economists develop models rather than doing fieldwork to observe what people actually do and how they interrelate (although there are, of course, economists who do just that). What keeps us perplexed is that economists seem *not* to think that it might be fruitful to also incorporate studies which investigate ‘identities in the wild’ into their model-building. Admittedly, me and others are guilty of the same. I do not recall having cited a single economist when writing about identity theories—although I do when talking about markets, transaction costs, or social cooperation—rather, I stick with fellow anthropologists, a few sociologists, and eventually one or two psychologists.

III. GROUP BOUNDARIES

Some analytical flaws that I identify in the paper’s argument may derive out of that. One is the taken-for-granted nature of ‘ethnic groups and boundaries’ (Barth 1969). As has been firmly established since the days the so-titled volume was released, this is not an easy relationship. Ethnic groups may lead long lives in spite of a constant flow of people across their boundaries. And none of these necessarily are given by birth or are primordial, as indicated by the authors of “Narrow Identities” (DG 2019, 395). As all social entities, identity-bearing groups or categories are necessarily culturally constructed—where else would they come from—and manipulable, although once there, they unfold an often strong force to

bind people together or put them at each other's throat under given circumstances. But they are equally never unquestioned and are exposed to permanent changes in membership, shape, and boundary delimitation. And membership in them is hardly inherited in the strict sense but has to be actively promoted by way of socialisation for each new generation. It is only such social and political pressure that makes them appear natural in the eyes of the people concerned—a phenomenon that has also been called "*emic*" primordialism (Gil-White 1999, 792). Some authors have even argued that the division of humankind into neatly-bounded ethnic groups is an invention of colonialism, at least for the African case, and that traditional societies were based more on perceptions of gradual change. Social identities were then located along a continuum. Villagers *A* see themselves as closest to villagers *B*, who in turn think of being equally similar to *C*, while the latter drop *A* as compatriots in favour for villagers *D*, and so on (Elwert 1989).

Even then, not all ethnic or national identity categories strictly ask for single membership. I have made the case of the Uzbeks in Central Asia who allow local Tajiks, Arabs, or Turkmens to switch affiliation but also to add their new affiliation to their original belonging, and to continue to speak a different language, as long as the overall repertoire of cultural expressions and associated political loyalty is adhered to. People may then be Tajiks and Uzbeks, the latter both as an overarching national category and as a local ethnic belonging (Finke and Sancak 2012; Finke 2014). Leach (1954) has described similar patterns for the Kachin in Myanmar and Astuti (1995) for the Vezo in Madagascar. Such perceptions also allow identities to change and not necessarily consider them to be acquired by birth. Other constellations do not allow such fluidity, as is the case for most societies based on unilineal descent models, which define the belonging of individuals as being determined by—socially defined—genealogies (Gil-White 1999; Finke and Sökefeld 2018).

IV. POWER, FREE-RIDING, AND SWITCHING RULES

Another flaw, in my understanding, is the homogeneous nature that these groups and categories seem to have for the authors. As I mentioned, rightly, the authors see identity as a way to find one's place in the world, but these places and positions are not equal. And neither are the chances to decide on one's identity or belonging. The terms power and inequality are conspicuously missing in the text, as if identifying oneself and others takes place in a simple equilibrium game. But in the real world, people

have very different stakes and different means at hand to pursue their interests. Manipulating or limiting the options for ethnic belongings for others are as part of this as is inciting someone to act in certain ways to one's own benefit. The history of humankind as one of conflicts and wars, both between groups as well as within, is a telling story of that. People may have little choice of which group they belong to, as exemplified by the (in)famous 'one-drop rule', which defined racial categorisations in North America.

Ethnic or other social groups often do not fulfil the expected outcomes for yet another reason. Their main function may be the provision of public goods but as in all spheres of life, there is always an opportunity and temptation for free riding. This may spoil all the efforts one invests into joining or leaving groups as well as the overall aims—if there is such a thing—of the group in question. Individuals, as every economist is well aware, differ in their preferences, and this also applies to the meaning that identities and attachments to others have for them. Such a view is by no means trivial or of marginal relevance for the sustainability of larger categories of humans but may well jeopardise any benefits sought with such affiliations. It has been argued, and the authors take a similar point towards the end of the paper, that most ethnic groups remain at the level of a category and hardly ever lead to much collective action so that conflicts between them usually have to be initiated by entrepreneurial actors seeking an individual benefit in this (Eriksen 1993). And the latter is certainly not per se “an increasing function of the aggregate group payoff” (DG 2019, 410). Elites may have an interest in increasing collective benefits for the greater amount of revenues this implies. But this can hardly be taken for granted. One may look at all the Napoleons world history has experienced. Or what to make out of group norms such as bride-wealth and polygyny that have been described as means of elites—elderly men in this case—to monopolise power, livestock, and human resources. Those disadvantaged by the types of institutions prevalent in a given society not only lack bargaining power to change this but also face social pressure that disenables them to vote for membership in a different group (Ensminger 1992).

V. THE COGNITION OF IDENTITY

Finally, and somewhat in contrast to the last point, identities—narrow or broad, exclusive or inclusive—also develop a life of their own, and people begin to strongly believe in their content. Thus, a change of affiliation is

not always easy and transcends simple calculations of costs and benefits. Being English, Swiss, Peruvian, or Mongol includes not only a feeling of cosiness to one's place and people but is also attached with ideas of right and wrong, of how things should be done properly, and what constitutes punishable behaviour. The world of social norms and ideologies comes in here and at times may unfold a strong impact on people's feelings and loyalties, making the latter difficult to switch (Finke and Sökefeld 2018). Having grown up with a particular image of oneself and one's origins, it may be almost unthinkable to change this by, for example, turning from being German into being French. But, of course, historically this is exactly what happened in places like Alsace and many other parts of the world again and again (and back and forth).

Summing up: While identities of any kind entail certain cultural models or schemes that influence people's worldviews, they also constitute—much in line with the arguments of the paper to be now discussed—institutional guidelines for concrete behaviour and interactional patterns. As I have argued elsewhere (Finke 2014), belonging to specific groups or categories may reduce transaction costs of various kinds, economic as well as social ones, and enable the provision of public goods. A logical consequence of this is that individuals may want to adapt their affiliations to those categories better suited to reducing transaction costs. But there may be significant exit and entry costs—including social ostracising and moral discomfort on the part of the individual concerned—to prevent such a shift. This may partly explain the longevity of ethnic groups that seem to be on the losing side of history.

Whether there is a strict positive correlation with the size of the groups in question is a different matter and one which I am more sceptical about. I also hesitate to define group affiliations and individual identifications as necessarily positive, providing communities with public goods. Sometimes the benefits narrowly stay with individuals. And a quick look at the world of today paints a picture of meanness and horrors conducted in the name of ethnic groups or other bearers of 'narrow identities', not only to outsiders but also to everyone perceived as a potential traitor within (those who do not support the collective aim, as defined by its leaders). This is certainly not only an issue of weak governance, as the authors claim. To a certain degree, it is rather exactly the consequence of the human trend to go for mutually exclusive categories when defining themselves. I am not sure if the models the authors develop and weigh

against each other will provide us with an answer to that. But it is certainly worth a try and welcomed food for thought.

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