Identifying Identity: A Semantic History

As I noted in the Introduction, this essay is a direct offshoot of my contribution to the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*. Convinced that a reference work covering the experience of over one hundred different immigrant peoples should also provide an entry on the host society to whose culture these groups had to adjust, the editors called for a discussion of “American identity.” Their insistence that such an entry must focus on the national “identity” was a product of the intellectual vogue enjoyed by the term, the development of which is traced here. But I did not yet know that when approached to write the article. All I knew was that it had to be about “American identity,” and that a survey of national characteristics such as optimism, individualism, and the like, was not what the editors had in mind. Given the elusive, not to say mystifying, quality of the term identity, my first task was obviously to decide in my own mind just what the subject of the essay actually was. Hence my first draft began with a sketchy history of the term that clarified it enough to allow me to proceed with the substantive discussion. Having served its deck-clearing function, and not being necessary to the substantive discussion as such, the prefatory semantic history was cut from the published version of an already lengthy entry, “American Identity and Americanization.”

The essay that follows here is an expanded version of the discarded preamble to the encyclopedia entry. Its elaboration owes much to the encouragement of Lewis Perry, who was editor of the *Journal of American History*, where it was first published, and to the anonymous readers who critiqued it at that time.

Today we could hardly do without the word identity in talking about immigration and ethnicity. Those who write on these matters use it casually; they assume the reader will know what they mean. And readers seem to feel that they do—at least there has been no clamor for clarifi-
cation of the term. But if pinned down, most of us would find it difficult to explain just what we do mean by identity. Its very obviousness seems to defy elucidation: identity is what a thing is! How is one supposed to go beyond that in explaining it? But adding a modifier complicates matters, for how are we to understand identity in such expressions as ethnic identity, Jewish identity, or American identity?

This is a question to which the existing writings on ethnicity do not provide a satisfactory answer. There are helpful discussions, to be sure, but none seems altogether adequate, at least not from the historian's viewpoint. The historically minded inquirer who gains familiarity with the literature, however, soon makes an arresting discovery—identity is a new term, as well as being an elusive and ubiquitous one. It came into use as a popular social science term only in the 1950s. The contrast between its handling in two standard reference works dramatizes its novelty. The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, published in 1968, carries a substantial article on “Identity, Psychosocial,” and another on “Identification, Political.” The original Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, published in the early 1930s, carries no entry at all for identity, and the entry headed “Identification” deals with fingerprinting and other techniques of criminal investigation.¹

So striking a shift demands investigation. In the following pages I will attempt to show that the semantic history of the word identity casts useful light on its ambiguities of meaning and also upon certain aspects of recent American thought. The investigation proceeds in three phases. Part one, which traces the emergence and diffusion of the term, is brief and descriptive. In the second section of the essay, I have singled out the work of Erik H. Erikson and of certain sociologists as the principal sources of interest in identity and have analyzed some of the complications that arise from the differing interpretations of the concept that they advance. The final section is more interpretive in the historical sense, since it focuses on those aspects of recent American cultural history that seem to me most relevant in explaining why the term identity caught on so quickly.

Identity comes from the Latin root idem, “the same,” and has been used in English since the sixteenth century. It has a technical meaning in algebra and logic and has been associated with the perennial mind-body problem in philosophy since the time of John Locke. The meaning of identity in this philosophical context is close to its meaning in ordinary usage, which is given as follows by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED): “the sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something
else; individuality, personality. *Personal identity* (In Psychology), the condition or fact of remaining the same person throughout the various phases of existence; continuity of the personality."

The *OED*’s first two usage citations illustrating psychological “personal identity” are from Locke’s *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690) and David Hume’s *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739). This tends to corroborate Robert Langbaum’s assertion that identity did not take on psychological connotations until the empiricist philosophers called into question what he calls “the unity of the self.” The unity of the self was not a problem so long as the traditional Christian conception of the soul held sway, but it became a problem when Locke declared that a man’s “Identity . . . consists in nothing but a participation of the same continued Life, by constantly fleeting Particles of Matter, in succession vitally united to the same organized Body.” Langbaum argues that Locke and Hume “use the word identity to cast doubt on the unity of the self,” and he has written a book to show how writers from William Wordsworth to D. H. Lawrence reacted to this challenge to the integrity of “the self.”

This tradition of usage is obviously very important; it invested identity with great intellectual significance and moral seriousness. But it was a restricted, quasi-technical tradition. Most of the time people who used the word *identity* in reference to personality or individuality did so in a looser, more informal manner. The *OED* gives two examples of this vernacular usage, as we might call it: “He doubted his own identity, and whether he was himself or another man” (from Washington Irving’s *Sketch Book*, 1820); and “Tom . . . had such a curious feeling of having lost his identity, that he wanted to reassure himself by the sight of his little belongings” (from E. Garrett’s *At Any Cost*, 1885).

*Identity* was sometimes casually employed in this vernacular manner by writers discussing immigration, but it did not represent an important analytical concept. Oscar Handlin’s classic book *The Uprooted* (1951) is perhaps the last major work in the field of which that could be said. Handlin used *identity* or *identify* a half-dozen or so times, but it was not a key term, and the contexts suggest that he was employing it in an unself-conscious manner as part of the ordinary vocabulary of common discourse. A particularly telling example is the passage in which he contrasts the immigrant’s loneliness and isolation in the New World to his secure niche in the ancestral village: “In the Old Country, this house in this village, these fields by these trees, had had a character and identity of their own. They testified to the peasant’s I, had fixed his place in the visible universe.” Here the word refers not directly to the peasant’s
psyche but to the distinctive physical surroundings of his once familiar world. The connection with psychological identity is very clear—indeed, the passage reminds us of Tom and his little belongings—but Handlin does not use the term in the way that contemporary usage had led us to expect. On the contrary, in looking back at the book one is struck at its virtually complete absence. The book’s themes are expressed, and its tone established, not by identity but by words such as uprootedness, alienation, and loneliness.\(^5\)

With Will Herberg’s Protestant-Catholic-Jew (1955) we have turned a corner. Not only do the words recur again and again, but identity and identification are, in a sense, what the book is all about. They are central to the interpretation of the problem Herberg set out to explore, namely, the place of organized religion in American life in the 1950s. Religion, he said, had become the most satisfactory vehicle for locating oneself in society and thereby answering the “aching question” of identity, Who am I? Ethnic identity figured prominently in the discussion because Herberg argued that the ethnic identities of an immigrant-derived population had transformed themselves into religious identification with organized Protestantism, Catholicism, or Judaism through the workings of Hansen’s law (“What the son wants to forget the grandson wants to remember”) and the triple melting pot. In short, Herberg interpreted the whole situation in terms of what was already being called “the search for identity.”\(^6\)

C. Vann Woodward’s essay “The Search for Southern Identity,” published in 1958, used the term without enclosing it in quotation marks or explicitly defining it, but it carried the new weight of meaning that identity was acquiring in the mid 1950s. W. L. Morton’s Canadian Identity, published a few years later, likewise regarded the word as entirely unproblematic.\(^7\) A rash of other publications used identity in title or subtitle in the late 1950s, and in 1960 the editors of an anthology entitled Identity and Anxiety drew attention to a marked shift from concern over conformity to concern with identity.\(^8\) Three years later the editor of another volume of readings could introduce the opening section, headed “Identity,” with the remark: “It is common knowledge that identity becomes a problem for the individual in a rapidly changing dynamic and technological society such as we have in America.” The collection included a selection by Kenneth Keniston in which he listed identity among “the most appealing moral terms of our time.”\(^9\)

Robert Penn Warren highlighted the importance identity had assumed by the mid 1960s in his Who Speaks for the Negro? (1965): “I seize the word identity. It is a key word. You hear it over and over again.
On this word will focus, around this word will coagulate, a dozen issues, shifting, shading into each other. Alienated from the world to which he is born and from the country of which he is a citizen, yet surrounded by the successful values of that new world, and country, how can the Negro define himself? Negroes were far from being alone in having identity problems. American Catholics fairly luxuriated in them. Martin Marty remembers being told by some Catholic collegians who were enthusiastically applauding a priest who had just renounced his priesthood: “You’ll never understand what an identity crisis the Catholic Church gave each one of us.” Others managed to preserve a better humor in their travail—at Harvard University notices were posted facetiously announcing that Catholic students were holding an “Identity Crisis” at a specified time and place.

By the early 1970s Robert Coles could lament that the terms identity and identity crisis had become “the purest of clichés.” A 1972 book, The Identity Society, which stated among other things that Vietnam was the first war fought by an “identity society,” offered corroborative evidence for that judgment. Identity had reached the level of generality and diffuseness that A. O. Lovejoy complained of many years earlier with respect to the word romantic: it had “come to mean so many things that, by itself, it means nothing. It has ceased to perform the function of a verbal sign.” There is little point in asking what identity “really means” when matters have reached this pass. The more pertinent questions are, What can we find out about the specific channels through which the word passed into such widespread use? and, What elements in the intellectual background of its emergence help explain its extraordinary popularity? To the first of these questions we now turn.

Erikson was the key figure in putting the word into circulation. He coined the expression identity crisis and did more than anyone else to popularize identity. In his usage identity means something quite definite, but terribly elusive. In fact, the subtlety of Eriksonian identity helps account for the vagueness that soon enveloped the term, for his ideas are of the sort that cannot bear being popularized without at the same time being blunted and muddied.

Erikson admits that identity, as he conceives it, is hard to grasp because it concerns “a process ‘located’ in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of those two identities.” What he seems to mean by this Delphic deliverance is that identity involves an interaction between the interior development of the individual personality, understood in terms derived from the Freudian id-ego-superego model, and the
growth of a sense of selfhood that arises from participating in society, internalizing its cultural norms, acquiring different statuses, and playing different roles. As the individual passes through the eight stages of the life cycle distinguished by Erikson, the ego undergoes certain experiences and confronts various tasks, distinctive to each stage. These experiences and tasks are related to biological maturation, but they are also intrinsically linked through social interaction to the milieu in which one finds oneself; the features of that milieu are in turn conditioned by the historical situation of the culture that shapes the social world in which the individual and his or her fellows exist. An identity crisis is a climactic turning point in this process; it is the normal occurrence of adolescence, but it can also be precipitated by unusual difficulties further along in the life cycle.

This conception of identity developed from Erikson’s clinical experience as a psychoanalyst working chiefly with children, and from reflection upon his own life experience as a European refugee intellectual who traveled widely in the United States and was acquainted with some of the leading social scientists of his generation. The rise of Adolf Hitler and World War II contributed to his interest in the interaction between large-scale historical movements and the development of individual personality, and it was against the background of World War II that Erikson first began to use the term identity.

Knowledge of his work was at first confined to professionals in psychology and related fields, but by the late 1950s his reputation began to reach a larger public. The appearance in 1963 of a second edition of Childhood and Society (originally published in 1950) was a major event. As other books followed in quick succession over the next few years, Erikson and his ideas became something of a cultural phenomenon. His study of Mahatma Gandhi won both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award. These honors, plus a biography by Coles in 1970, provided the occasion for extensive treatment of Erikson in mass circulation magazines. His being selected in 1973 to deliver the prestigious Jefferson Lectures in the Humanities testified to Erikson’s high standing among intellectual opinion leaders.¹¹

Erikson’s influence was crucial, but his writings were not the only source from which the terminology of identity passed into general circulation. On the contrary, Erikson was concerned as early as 1958 to distinguish his version of identity from other usages; the following year he insisted that identity formation, as he understood it, began where the notion of “identification” left off. By the late 1960s the terminological situation had gotten completely out of hand, and Erikson tried once more
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to set the record straight. Identity was not the same as role playing, he wrote; it was not just self-conception or self-image, and it was not simply an answer to the faddish question, Who am I?\textsuperscript{15}

The mentions of identification and role playing provide useful clues to follow up in searching for other sources of interest in identity. The term \textit{identification} was introduced by Sigmund Freud to designate the process by which the infant assimilates to itself external persons or objects. It became a key element in psychoanalytical explanations of socialization in children; through the 1940s its use was confined almost exclusively to psychologists.\textsuperscript{16} Gordon W. Allport was still using “identification” primarily in connection with childhood development in his influential \textit{Nature of Prejudice} (1954), but his discussion is significant because it implied a more general applicability for the concept and linked it with ethnicity. Conceding that the term was loosely defined, Allport said that it conveyed “the sense of emotional merging of oneself with others.” Then he illustrated its operation:

One of the areas where identification may most easily take place is that of social values and attitudes. . . . Sometimes a child who confronts a social issue for the first time will ask his parents what attitude he should hold. Thus he may say, “Daddy, what are we? Are we Jews or gentiles; Protestants or Catholics; Republicans or Democrats?” When told what “we” are, the child is fully satisfied. From then on, he will accept his membership and the ready-made attitudes that go with it.\textsuperscript{17}

Identification understood in this sense is very closely related to role theory and reference group theory. That is, identification is involved in the process by which persons come to realize what groups are significant for them, what attitudes concerning them they should form, and what kind of behavior is appropriate. Both role theory and reference group theory were new; they were also gaining rapidly in acceptance among sociologists and social psychologists. As they did so, the theoretical relevance of identification—and the inseparably linked notion of identity—was brought home to other social scientists besides the psychologists who had first used these terms.\textsuperscript{18}

Ralph Linton’s \textit{Study of Man} (1936) introduced role theory, showed how the concept of social role was intimately linked with that of social status, and made it possible for these two concepts to be “systematically incorporated into a developing theory of social structure.”\textsuperscript{19} Role theory quickly became a major conceptual perspective for sociology, but as Nelson N. Foote pointed out in 1951, it lacked “a satisfactory account of
motivation." To explain why people were willing to be cast in certain roles, accepting the statuses that accompanied those roles, Foote proposed identification as the basis for a theory of motivation in social interaction.20

 Explicitly distinguishing his use of the term from Freud's, Foote defined identification as "appropriation of and commitment to a particular identity or series of identities" on the part of an individual. Identification "proceeds by naming," he added, for to appropriate and be committed to an identity meant that one accepted the name (that is, assignment to a certain category) given by others on the basis of family lineage, religion, work activity, and other attributes. Appropriation of these identities by an individual transformed social ascriptions into elements of an evolving sense of selfhood and was experienced as a process of self-discovery and self-actualization. But identities of this sort were not imposed by society in an absolute way, and as one grew older and was exposed to a greater variety of social situations, one could combine and modify identities by conscious choice more effectively than was possible for a child or young person.21

 Foote's article firmly linked identification with role theory; in doing so it laid great stress on a kind of "identity" that was different from Erikson's and closer to what I have called the vernacular meaning of the word. Foote did not mention reference group theory, perhaps because it was so new when he wrote. It was, however, quite compatible with his analysis since it dealt with the way in which a person's attitudes, values, and sense of identity were shaped by alignment with, or rejection of, "reference groups" that had significance for the individual, either positively or negatively. The expression reference group was coined only in 1942, and for the first few years its use was confined to social psychologists. In 1950 Robert Merton and Alice S. Kitt (later Alice S. Rossi) brought the concept to the attention of the larger sociological community in a path-breaking essay. Seven years later this discussion, revised and enlarged, was given much greater visibility in the second edition of Merton's very influential Social Theory and Social Structure, which devoted no fewer than 161 pages to reference groups. Being primarily interested in systematic structural analysis, Merton did not lay much emphasis on identity or identification. He did, however, point out the relevance of reference group theory to these matters, and by so greatly augmenting the prestige of a sociological approach to which they were intimately related, he contributed importantly to popularizing the terminology of identity.22

 Identity eventually gained an even more prominent place in the
vocabulary of the sociological school known as symbolic interactionists. Emerging as a self-conscious group around 1940, the symbolic interactionists were especially interested in the way social interaction, mediated through shared symbolic systems, shaped the self-consciousness of the individual. They did not at first use the word *identity* in analyzing this sort of interaction because the founding fathers of the approach, Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead, had spoken instead of “the self,” and that continued to be the preferred term through the 1960s. By that time, however, *identity* had also become a “stock technical term” for symbolic interactionists. Erving Goffman and Peter L. Berger played important roles in popularizing this sociological understanding of identity since their works reached a more general audience than that constituted solely by academic specialists. Goffman shifted from the terminology of “the self” to that of “identity” in his 1963 work, *Stigma*. In the same year, Berger’s popular *Invitation to Sociology* featured identity quite prominently in its treatment of role theory and reference group theory, dramaturgical sociology, and the phenomenological approach.

By the mid 1960s, the word *identity* was used so widely and so loosely that to determine its provenance in every context would be impossible. But enough has been said to show that sociological traditions of usage in role theory, reference group theory, and symbolic interactionism constituted important feeder streams supplementing the principal source of popularization, Eriksonian psychology. Besides helping to popularize the term, sociological usage also contributed to its uncertainty of meaning because the kind of identity that sociologists had in mind was not the same as that contemplated by Erikson.

The two approaches differ most significantly on whether identity is to be understood as something internal that persists through change or as something ascribed from without that changes according to circumstance. For Erikson, the elements of interiority and continuity are indispensable. Working within the Freudian tradition, he affirms that identity is somehow “located” in the deep psychic structure of the individual. Identity is shaped and modified by interaction between the individual and the surrounding social milieu, but, change and crisis notwithstanding, it is at bottom an “accrued confidence” in the “inner sameness and continuity” of one’s own being.

The sociologists, on the other hand, tend to view identity as an artifact of interaction between the individual and society—it is essentially a matter of being designated by a certain name, accepting that designation, internalizing the role requirements accompanying it, and behaving according to those prescriptions. Foote is explicit here, and Berger
asserts not only that identities are "socially bestowed" but that they "must also be socially sustained, and fairly steadily so." He adds pointedly that this sociological view of personality challenges the assumption of continuity in the self. "Looked at sociologically, the self is no longer a solid, given entity. . . . It is rather a process, continuously created and re-created in each social situation that one enters, held together by the slender thread of memory." Another sociologist, acknowledging Goffman's influence, goes even further by equating identity with social relationship. "We have treated social relationship and identity as merely different terms for referring to the same phenomena: the establishment of mutually recognized, expected sequences of behavior in a transaction. Identity refers to the individual's sequence of acts; relationship refers to the ensemble of acts made up by the sequences of all the parties involved."

Obviously we are back at the problem of "the unity of the self," the emergence of which Langbaum associates with the writings of Locke and Hume. Indeed, it is striking how closely the formulation just quoted parallels Locke's contention that "Identity . . . consists in nothing but a participation of the same continued Life, by constantly fleeting Particles of Matter." The reappearance in new form of what we might call the philosophical problem of the soul is of considerable interest in itself, but it is also related to an issue more immediately relevant to students of ethnicity, namely, whether ethnic identity is something primordially given or optionally cultivated.

The distinction between these two interpretations emerged only recently; it has not, to my knowledge, been systematically explored. Briefly, the difference between the two approaches is that primordialists regard ethnicity as a given, a basic element in one's personal identity that is simply there and cannot be changed, while optionalists hold that ethnicity is not an indelible stamp impressed on the psyche but a dimension of individual and group existence that can be consciously emphasized or deemphasized as the situation requires. This disagreement obviously involves a fundamental issue concerning ethnic identity, and it just as obviously parallels the difference between the Eriksonian and the sociological understanding of identity itself.

The parallel rests on the centrality of the question of continuity or permanence to both sets of contrasting interpretations. In the case of identity, Erikson insists that an inner continuity of personality perdures through all the changes the individual undergoes in passing through the stages of the life cycle, while the interactionists envision a flickering succession of identities adopted and shed according to the requirements of different social situations. In respect to ethnicity, the primordialists
plump for permanence, whereas the optionalists believe that ethnicity can, within certain limits, be assumed or put aside by conscious choice.

The analogy between these two sets of interpretations is striking. But since it has never been pointed out before, much less studied in detail, its implications are not wholly clear. One might ask, for example, whether a person who accepts the Eriksonian version of personal identity is thereby committed to a primordialist position on ethnic identity. The two positions are beautifully congruent, but I would not be prepared to argue that the one logically entails the other. On the other hand, consistency would surely require an interactionist on personal identity to adopt the optionalist view of ethnicity. The key point for the present discussion, however, is that the analogy brings out clearly the basic equivocation embedded in discussions of identity (including ethnic identity) as a result of the fact that different users assign different meanings to the term. For Eriksonians/primordialists, identity is deep, internal, and permanent; for interactionists(optionalists), identity is shallow, external, and evanescent. It is bad enough that, in many contexts of usage, one cannot tell which of these very different interpretations is intended. Much worse is the likelihood that many who speak of identity are completely oblivious of the equivocation and hence do not themselves know which of the interpretations they intend.

Confusion arising from this source and from other perplexities of terminology bedevils discussion at every level from popular journalism to scholarly analysis. Hearings recently held by the United States Commission on Civil Rights on “Civil Rights Issues of Euro-Ethnic Americans” furnish an instructive example from the broad area of debate over social policy. The “consultation,” as it was officially designated, took place in 1979 and provided a sounding board for white ethnic spokespersons unhappy about programs of the affirmative action type. Several of the witnesses likewise expressed misgivings about the label Euro-ethnic, which led Geno Baroni to observe: “We argue about terminology—even the name of this meaning. . . . We don’t have the language to describe ourselves, and America has no national sense of identity.” Irving M. Levine, like Baroni a pioneer of the new ethnicity, was equally troubled about Americans’ inability to understand the nature of identity. The situation was not helped by the careless way terms relating to race and ethnicity are used, even by judges, and Levine suggested that it was time for the United States Commission on Civil Rights “to clear up some of the definitions.”

Especially interesting were the remarks of Francis X. Femminella. Noting that other witnesses had “talked about ethnic identity,” Fem-
minella delivered a brief disquisition on “ethnic ego identity . . . a very special kind of a concept.” His purpose was not merely to clarify the ambiguities left by other testimony but also to refute the claim that ethnic groups could not perpetuate themselves without some degree of self-segregation. Invoking Erikson’s authority, he argued that a person internalizes the social heritage of his or her group at so deep a level that it is “damn close” to being “genetically inheritable.” For that reason, ethnic communities need not seal themselves off from others; rather, “if that heritage is there, then the ethnic communities will go on irrespective of whether they have a locale.”

These observations illustrate the affinity between Eriksonian identity and primordialist ethnicity. The linkage has important implications from the viewpoint of advocacy, for the intimate association thus established between personal identity and ethnic heritage makes plausible the argument that ethnic cultures require some sort of official recognition if the self-esteem of individuals is not to suffer damage. The respect for the dignity of the individual demanded by the democratic ideology is thereby extended to cover ethnic cultures that sustain the sense of personal self-worth. Femminella did not develop this aspect of the matter, but his remarks suggest another strategic use of this perspective in controversy. For the Eriksonian theoretical framework, “where,” as Femminella put it, “you can get something going,” made it possible for him to avoid the taint of racialism while asserting that ethnicity would perdure indefinitely without any need for potentially divisive group self-segregation.

But of course every position has the defect of its virtues. The defect here is that so strong a primordialist argument inevitably suggests the conclusion that, if ethnicity is bound to persist anyhow, there is no great need for new social policies designed to foster or protect it. The optionalist view is much better adapted for arguing in favor of new social policies because it stresses the role of situational factors in shaping ethnic identity. Since the participants in the Euro-ethnic consultation were overwhelmingly in favor of changes in policy, it is not surprising that they also made use of the optionalist argument. Paul J. Asciolla was most explicit: he said that “the concept of ethnicity as a factor in American culture” would “diminish or indeed vanish” if it were not “kept alive consciously.”

No one pointed out the contradiction between Femminella’s position and that of Asciolla. Very likely it was not even noticed; we are so accustomed to hearing ethnic identity talked about in both ways that the contradictory implications pass us by. From the viewpoint of advocacy,
it would not have been very adroit to call attention to the equivocation of terminology anyhow, for it is clearly advantageous to be able in certain contexts to argue that ethnic identity is fixed and in others to affirm that it is malleable. But much as the controversialist may like having terms that mean whatever the rhetorical situation requires, equivocation of this sort is fatal to efforts to achieve a clear theoretical grasp of the issues. It is likewise a grievous handicap to the forging of sound social policy through rational debate. On that account, bringing such equivocation out into the open is of more than purely academic interest.

Having sketched the popularization of the term and having investigated its provenance and some of its complexities, we turn now to the matter of causes, seeking to answer the question, Why did *identity* so quickly become an indispensable term in American social commentary? A full answer would take more space than is available here, but some comments are required to round out the semantic history of identity. We will first consider the mystique of the social sciences and the vogue of national character studies, which are best thought of as mediating conditions that contributed to the popularization of the term. Then we will look briefly at more substantive causes for concern with identity.

The mystique of the social sciences is relevant to the popularization of identity because the new usage derived from the technical vocabulary of psychology and sociology; for that reason, it shared in the aura of cognitive authority surrounding the social sciences at midcentury. Although they had emerged as autonomous disciplines around 1900, the social sciences came into their own only after World War I. They developed a strong corporate sense in the 1920s and created a major support institution in the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), which quickly attracted large-scale funding from philanthropic foundations. By the end of the decade, the social scientific disciplines had matured sufficiently to make possible the publication of a monumental collaborative work, *The Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, which appeared between 1930 and 1935. The New Deal opened new opportunities for public service for economists and other social scientists. Then came World War II. That really brought the social scientists out of their ivory towers and set them to work for their country, as Stuart Chase observed in an admiring survey of the wartime accomplishments and postwar prospects of the social sciences.35

Chase’s book *The Proper Study of Mankind* (1948) illustrates the way the war enhanced the prestige of the social sciences. It was undertaken at the suggestion of officials of the SSRC and Carnegie Corporation, who “followed the project step by step” and provided financial support.
The roll call of scholars who encouraged Chase and provided information on the “mine of fresh material accumulated during the war” constituted a veritable who’s who of the social sciences. The book itself explained the scientific method and reviewed its achievements—many of which were war related—in such fields as human relations, public opinion polling, and learning theory. Reviewers hailed the book as a valuable reconnaissance that indicated directions for future research, and it sold well enough to justify a revised edition in 1956. By that time the intellectual authority of the social sciences seemed to Chase so well established that he said “an intelligent layman” would hesitate to form a judgment on “complicated questions about crime or sex or the federal budget without some background in social science—perhaps a course or two in college, or in the extension field.”

As supporting evidence for this dictum Chase might have cited the role played by social scientific evidence in the fight for racial desegregation. He might likewise have pointed to the vast readership enjoyed by David Riesman’s *Lonely Crowd* (1950) and the almost equal success of William H. Whyte, Jr.’s *Organization Man* (1956). With the publication in 1959 of Vance Packard’s *Status Seekers*, “pop sociology” had come of age as a literary genre with mass appeal.

These developments testify to the belief, widely held by lay people as well as by academic intellectuals, that the social sciences could unlock the secrets of the human condition. This belief goes a long way toward explaining why *identity* caught on so quickly in the 1950s. Although the word had been used in the vernacular sense for a long time, the kind of identity talked about by psychologists and sociologists seemed to refer to something deeper, more mysterious, and more important. It was a matter of universal concern, since everyone had an identity, but to fathom its involvement in harrowing “searches” and agonizing “crises” one had to call on the special expertise of the social scientist. The association of the term *identity* with the social sciences thus added to its intellectual cachet, making it part of the conceptual equipment of the approach that offered the best hope of solving the problems besetting American society.

Among the many problems facing American society in the years after World War II, understanding the national character would probably not strike us today as one meriting high priority. Yet self-understanding is always important, and in that era the study of national character was regarded as one of the most exciting frontier areas of the social sciences. The vogue of national character studies is particularly relevant for us because Erikson had close connections with the group of social scientists who pioneered a new approach to the subject, and it was against the
background of national character studies that he began to put the term *identity* into circulation.

The belief that different human groups are marked by distinctive characteristics is at least as old as Herodotus, but it had fallen into disrepute in the 1930s as a result of its association with racialism. The new era of scientifically respectable study of national character was inaugurated in World War II by a group of scholars who were called upon by agencies of the United States government to apply their skills to such questions as how civilian morale could best be maintained or what kind of propaganda could be most effectively employed against the enemy. Margaret Mead was the best-known scholar involved, and she led the way in applying to these questions the methods worked out in the 1930s by the culture-and-personality school of anthropologists. She was one of the founders of this school, which combined psychological assumptions and ethnographic observation in the effort to discover how group norms and attitudes were stamped on the personalities of individuals belonging to different cultures. From this mode of investigation to the study of national character was only a short step, and Margaret Mead later stated explicitly that what were called culture-and-personality studies in the 1930s "would today [1961] be called . . . 'national character' [studies]." The degree of scientific prestige attained by this approach is best illustrated in the postwar Tensions Project, an ambitious collaborative investigation initiated by UNESCO and supported by the SSRC, which relied heavily on the national character perspective in its effort to find ways of reducing "tensions affecting international understanding." And in 1954 the historian of nationalism Louis L. Snyder spoke respectfully of the developing "science of national character."

There were national character studies of other peoples—Ruth Benedict's book on the Japanese, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), being especially notable—but studies of the American character were the most popular. Margaret Mead's *And Keep Your Powder Dry* (1942) opened the era in which studies of the American character became a leading growth sector of the knowledge industry and almost the reason for being of the new discipline (or disciplinary holding company) of American studies. The key point for us is that American character studies dealt directly with the relationship of the individual and society and explored the problem of whether, to what extent, or how the individual's personality, character, or "identity" was shaped by the culture in which he or she was a participant.

A direct connection can be shown between this general development and the introduction of the term *identity*, since Erikson was closely
associated with the social scientists engaged in wartime national character studies. He prepared memoranda for the Committee for National Morale on the stresses of life on submarines, on interrogating German prisoners of war, and on the feasibility of making psychological observations in internment camps. His major contribution was an inquiry into Hitler’s success in winning the loyalty of German youth by embodying in himself the anxieties and fantasies of a generation that experienced national humiliation, cultural crisis, and economic collapse. Margaret Mead cited this study in *And Keep Your Powder Dry*, and Coles has stressed its importance when discussing the impact of the war on Erikson’s thinking about identity.

Erikson knew and admired Margaret Mead’s work on the American character, and he first worked out his ideas on the interaction between “ego identity” and “group identity” in the context of the wartime investigation of national character. The 1946 article “Ego Development and Historical Change” was published in a specialized psychoanalytical journal and was clinically oriented, but it also showed marked affinities with national character studies since Erikson was concerned with the way in which the individual’s social heritage (group identity) affected the development of personality (ego identity). It was essential, he wrote, “to correlate a patient’s childhood history with the history of his family’s sedentary residence in prototypical areas (East), in ‘backward’ areas (South), or in ‘forward’ areas (Western and Northern frontier), as these areas were gradually incorporated into the American version of the Anglo-Saxon cultural identity.” In emphasizing polarities in the American group identity, Erikson was taking over an insight first elaborated by one of his wartime co-workers, Gregory Bateson, in a paper “Morale and National Character.” As heir to a history of extreme contrast and abrupt changes, said Erikson, the “functioning American . . . bases his final ego-identity on some tentative combination of dynamic polarities such as migratory and sedentary, individualistic and standardized, competitive and cooperative, pious and free-thinking, etc.” Touching on the challenges of the war experience, Erikson spoke of the “subliminal panic” that accompanied “the large scale testing of the American identity” in the war. “Historical change,” he declared, “has reached a coercive universality and a global acceleration which is experienced as a threat to the emerging American identity.”

Erikson reworked much of this material for the chapter of *Childhood and Society* (1950) entitled “Reflections on the American Identity.” This chapter marks a milestone in the semantic history of identity because it was the first major publication in which the expression American...
identity was used as the equivalent of American character. Reverting again to the subject of polarities, Erikson began by observing that virtually all characteristically American traits have opposites that are likewise characteristically American. “This, one suspects,” he continued in the second sentence of the chapter, “is true of all ‘national characters’ or (as I would prefer to call them) national identities.” Although distinctive in being based primarily on Erikson’s clinical experience as a psychoanalytical therapist, the chapter was clearly in the tradition of commentaries on the American character. Thus Erikson made reference to Vernon Louis Parrington’s work, alluded to the legacies of Puritanism and the frontier, and touched on many other familiar themes of national character commentary.

That identity could be used alternatively for character in an era when national character studies were extremely popular doubtless helped to smooth the way for its rapid acceptance. But that is surely not a sufficient explanation for the enormous success of the term. Identity, after all, gained much greater currency than character ever had, and its popularity continued long after the vogue of national character studies was forgotten. Its having been launched in the favorable climate created by the interest in national character studies and its prestige as a term taken from the technical vocabulary of social science must therefore be understood as factors that mediated its popularization rather than being regarded as decisive causes.

What, then, was the decisive cause? The most important consideration, I would say, was that the word identity was ideally adapted to talking about the relationship of the individual to society as that perennial problem presented itself to Americans at midcentury. More specifically, identity promised to elucidate a new kind of conceptual linkage between the two elements of the problem, since it was used in reference to, and dealt with the relationship of, the individual personality and the ensemble of social and cultural features that gave different groups their distinctive character.

The relationship of the individual to society has always been problematic for Americans because of the surpassing importance in the national ideology of the values of freedom, equality, and the autonomy of the individual. Alexis de Tocqueville analyzed in classical fashion how democratic principles and equilitarian social conditions gave rise to an “individualism” (a word he effectively introduced into the language) that tended to shrivel a man’s consciousness of solidarity with his fellows, throwing him forever back upon himself alone and threatening to “shut [him] up in the solitude of his own heart.” He did not, of course, use
the term *identity* in this connection, but it is impossible for today's reader not to think of "identity problems" on encountering Tocqueville's uncannily modern diagnosis of the psychological strains created by uncertainties of status and his description of the strange restlessness that made Americans "serious and almost sad even in their pleasures." It is also easy to understand why there was in the 1950s an admiration for Tocqueville that approached veneration, for "the isolation of the individual and the atomization of society" that he described in Jacksonian times anticipated the discovery of mass society that loomed so large in the landscape of American social commentary at midcentury.

The post-World War II critique of mass society drew on a variety of sources, but what gave it compelling urgency and made it a matter of general concern was undoubtedly the frightening rise of totalitarianism followed by the catastrophe of world war. Refugee intellectuals, who had special reason to abhor totalitarianism, were important contributors to the critique of mass culture, and one influential group—the so-called Frankfurt School, whose "dialectical method" fused Marxist and Freudian perspectives—saw in American society tendencies that could well eventuate in totalitarianism and that were already producing "authoritarian personalities" susceptible to fascism. The relation of the individual to society was the crucial issue for critics of mass society, who discussed it in terms of "alienation," "anxiety," "anomie," "ethnocentrism," "status consciousness," "conformity," and "the need for belonging." Riesman introduced "other-directedness," and the title of his book—*The Lonely Crowd*—epitomized the central problem: personal isolation in a mass society. Handlin's book *The Uprooted*, published a year after Riesman's volume, explored a different dimension of American social experience, but it also put into circulation a term—*uprootedness*—that added a new strain of poignance to the interpretation of the relation of the individual to American society.

In these circumstances the questions, Who am I? and, Where do I belong became inevitable. Identity was, in a sense, what the discussion was all about. As Erikson noted in 1950, "we begin to conceptualize matters of identity at the very time in history when they become a problem." The study of identity, he believed, was "as strategic in our time as the study of sexuality was in Freud's time." Understood as a concept of the social sciences, "identity" thus gained its original currency because of its aptness for discussing one of the issues that dominated the American intellectual horizon of the 1950s, "the survival of the person in mass society." In those days the characteristic problem centered on "the search for identity," which was thought to arise primarily from the in-
individual’s feeling of being rootless and isolated in a swarming, anonymous throng. In the next decade the cultural climate changed drastically, and the mass society problem receded far into the background. But the word identity did not decline with the fading interest in the problems that first called for employment of the concept; on the contrary, it gained even greater popularity. The problem of the relation of the individual to society assumed new forms in the turmoil of the 1960s, but identity was more relevant than ever—only now it was of “identity crises” that one heard on every hand.

Few who lived through that troubled time would deny that the expression identity crisis spoke with greater immediacy to the American condition than the formula search for identity. For the nation did go through a profound crisis—social, political, and cultural—between the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the resignation of Richard Nixon. The ingredients of the crisis—racial violence, campus disruptions, antiwar protests, cultural upheaval, and the abuse of official power and betrayal of public trust—need no elaboration. The point is that the national crisis translated itself to the ordinary citizen as a challenge to all individuals to decide where they stood with respect to the traditional values, beliefs, and institutions that were being called into question, and with respect to the contrasting interpretations being offered of American society, American policies, and the American future. In other words, the national crisis brought about a reexamination on a massive scale of the relationship between the individual and society. That was the relationship with which identity dealt, and in innumerable cases the reexamination was sufficiently intense to make the expression identity crisis seem very apt.

Within the context of cultural crisis, the revival of ethnicity deserves special attention as perhaps the most important legacy of the 1960s so far as usage of identity is concerned. There is in the nature of the case a close connection between the notion of identity and the awareness of belonging to a distinctive group set apart from others in American society by race, religion, national background, or some other cultural marker. As a matter of fact, Erikson alluded to the acculturation of immigrants immediately after drawing attention in 1950 to the timeliness of identity as an analytical concern. Looking back twenty years later, he underscored his own experience as an immigrant in tracing the developing his thinking about identity: “It would seem almost self-evident now how the concepts of ‘identity’ and ‘identity crisis’ emerged from my personal, clinical, and anthropological observations in the thirties and forties. I do not remember when I started to use these terms; they seemed naturally
grounded in the experience of emigration, immigration, and Americanization.\textsuperscript{51}

That is certainly plausible. But the connection between Erikson's personal experience and his sensitivity to identity problems doubtless seemed clearer by 1970 because of the growth of interest in ethnicity in the intervening years and because of the new respectability gained by ethnic consciousness. In the late 1940s, assimilation was thought to have eroded immigrant cultures almost entirely, and the lingering vestiges of group consciousness seemed not only archaic but also potentially dysfunctional as sources of ethnocentrism, antiintellectualism, and isolationist sentiment.\textsuperscript{56} Even Herberg, who first stressed the linkage between ethnicity and the search for identity, believed ethnic identities were being replaced by religious identities. The black revolution of the 1960s and the subsequent emergence of the new ethnicity changed all that. These movements affirmed the durability of ethnic consciousness, gave it legitimacy and dignity, and forged an even more intimate bond between the concepts of ethnicity and identity. And these developments not only took place against the background of the national identity crisis; they were also dialectically related to it—that is, ethnic or minority identities became more appealing options because of the discrediting of traditional Americanism brought about by the racial crisis and the Vietnam War.\textsuperscript{56} As Nathan Glazer pointed out in 1975, a situation had by then developed in "the ecology of identities" in which, for the first time in American history, it seemed more attractive to many individuals to affirm an ethnic identity than to affirm that one was simply an American.\textsuperscript{57} The evidence cited earlier from the consultation on Euro-ethnics indicates that ethnic identity is still perceived to be closely related to group concerns and social policy, which supports the contention that the ethnic revival has had the most enduring effect on usage of the term identity.

Thus far the semantic history of identity. What can we conclude from it? Three reflections of special relevance for historians suggest themselves. The first is simply a plea for wider application of the historical approach as a method for clarifying ambiguous concepts. Not many American historians have undertaken investigations of this sort, although there are a few outstanding examples.\textsuperscript{58} Without claiming to have cleared up all the problems associated with identity, I would argue that the present study has brought to light much that was not known about it before and that could never have been discovered by purely systematic conceptual analysis.

Second, I would suggest that historians interested in problems in-
volving identity acquaint themselves with the sociological writings about the subject in addition to resorting to the works of Erikson. There are, as we have seen, important differences between the two interpretations. Erikson’s is by far the better known; for certain purposes, however, the sociological perspective may offer a more useful conceptual framework for analyzing socio-historical influences on identity than Erikson’s primarily psychological approach. In any case, familiarity with both brings into sharper focus the distinctive assumptions of each and thereby assists historians in reaching their own conclusions as to how the concept of identity should be handled.

The final point to be emphasized is the obvious one that historians need to be very careful in talking about identity and highly critical in assessing the way others talk about it. The term can legitimately be employed in a number of ways. It may, for example, mean no more than that a person or group is known by a certain name, but it may also be used in reference to the distinguishing characteristics marking whatever is known by that name or to the ensemble of cultural features that collectively constitutes the larger reality with which a person or group is identified through a certain name. Erikson seems at times to encompass all of these senses in his notion of identity, but his characteristic emphasis is on a crucial psychic ingredient, something within the personality of the individual that makes it possible “to experience one’s self as something that has continuity and sameness, and to act accordingly.”

Adding to the already great likelihood of confusion arising from this array of possible meanings is the ambiguity stemming from the fact that the sociologists most apt to talk about identity understand it in a quite different way.

For these reasons, responsible use of the term demands a lively sensitivity to the intrinsic complexities of the subject matter with which it deals and careful attention to the need for precision and consistency in its application. But of course its enormous popularization has had just the opposite effect: as identity became more and more of a cliché, its meaning grew progressively more diffuse, thereby encouraging increasingly loose and irresponsible usage. The depressing result is that a good deal of what passes for discussion of identity is little more than portentous incoherence, and the historian need not be intimidated into regarding it as more than that. What is called for, rather, is confidence in the traditional critical skills of the historical craft. By applying them with care, historians can make a contribution to better understanding of a significant problem in contemporary American culture.
COMING TO TERMS WITH ETHNICITY

NOTES


a. See Stephan Thernstrom, Ann Orlov, and Oscar Handlin, eds., Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), 31–58. The words “and Americanization” were added by the editors after the essay was completed. For a sketch of the approach it follows, see the opening paragraphs of chap. 6, “Americans All.”


2. The definition quoted in the text is the second given for identity. The first, not germane here, is: “The quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration; absolute or essential sameness; oneness.” OED, s. v. identity.


4. OED, s. v. identity.


18. In 1950 a sociologist associated with the Menninger Clinic began an article by asking: “What concern can sociology have, one might ask, with such a strictly psychological phenomenon as identification?” Louisa P. Holt, “Identification: A Crucial Concept for Sociology,” Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic, 14 (September 1950), 164–73.

19. Ralph Linton’s paternity of role theory as a systematic conceptual perspective is categorically asserted by Robert Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure (Glencoe, Ill., 1957), 368n. See also Ralph Linton, The Study of Man: An Introduction (New York, 1936), 113–31.


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typescript. 1982 (in possession of Andrew J. Weigert). For general treatments, see
Bernard N. Melzer, John W. Petras, and Larry T. Reynolds, Symbolic Interactionism:
Genesis, Varieties, and Criticism (London, 1975); Paul Elliott Rock, The Making of

24. Erving Goffman, The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life (Garden City,
N.Y., 1959); Goffman, Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (Engle­
wood Cliffs, N.J., 1963); Peter L. Berger, Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic
Approach (Garden City, N.Y., 1963). The importance of Anselm Strauss’s Mirrors and
Masks in putting the word identity into the working vocabulary of symbolic interac­
tionists is stressed by Weigert, “Identity,” 10–11.

25. For discussion of the evolution of Erikson’s concept of identity, see Coles,
Erikson, 165–79, 265.


Tamotsu Shibutani, ed., Human Nature and Collective Behavior: Papers in Honor of
Herbert Blumer (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), 205. See also the discussion of Erving
Goffman’s term identity kit, which refers to “the assortment of role identities that
each individual carries with him,” in William M. Newman, “Multiple Realities: The

28. The distinction was, I believe, first broached by Nathan Glazer and Daniel P.
Moyihan in commenting on the contributions to a volume of essays that they edited.
See Glazer and Moyihan, eds., Ethnicity: Theory and Experience (Cambridge, Mass.,
1975), 19–20. They called the two approaches “primordialist” and “circumstantialist,”
but the term optionalist was substituted for circumstantialist in Peter K. Eisinger,
“Ethnicity as a Strategic Option: An Emerging View,” Public Administration Review,
38 (January–February 1978), 89–93. See also Pierre L. van den Berghe, The Ethnic

29. Calling for “deobfuscation” of identity, Carlos H. Arce says that the scholarly
literature on Chicano identity “demonstrates the confused commingling of disparate
phenomena and the failure to develop consistent conceptual definitions.” He also
speaks of the “conceptual morass” of earlier work on Mexican-American communities.
Carlos H. Arce, “A Reconsideration of Chicano Culture and Identity,” Daedalus, 110
(Spring, 1981), 182–83.

tunities and Challenges. A Consultation Sponsored by the United States Commission
For other observations about the term Euro-ethnic, see ibid., 76, 584.

31. Ibid., 12, 8.

32. Ibid., 284.

33. As John W. Briggs has noted, it is “the central tenet of the ‘new ethnicity’
movement that group identity and roots are vitally important to personal identity,
character, and psychological well-being.” See Briggs, review of Patrick J. Gallo, Old
Bread, New Wine, American Historical Review, 87 (April 1982), 544. This theme
recurs frequently in the 1970 hearings on the bill to establish ethnic heritage studies
centers. See Ethnic Heritage Studies Centers. Hearings before the General Subcom­
mittee on Education of the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Represen­
tatives, on H.R. 14910, 91st Cong., 2d sess. (Washington, D.C., 1970), 1, 22, 23–24,

34. Civil Rights Issues of Euro-Ethnic Americans, 284, 569.

Another observer stated at the time: “During World War II the social scientist took his place, with dignity, alongside the medical and physical scientist. To the contributions of the physicist, the chemist, and the technologist were added the contributions of the anthropologist, economist, political scientist, psychologist, psychiatrist, and sociologist. . . . This phenomenal acceleration in the development and productivity of the social sciences, though occurring under the compulsion of war, may yet prove at least one great boon to mankind.” Charles E. Hendry, Foreword, in Goodwin Watson, Action for Unity (New York, 1947), x. For a more recent survey of the subject, see Gene M. Lyons, The Uneasy Partnership: Social Science and the Federal Government in the Twentieth Century (New York, 1969), 80–123.

36. For the role of the SSRC and Carnegie Corporation, and for the listing of social science informants, see Stuart Chase, The Proper Study of Mankind (New York, 1948), xv–xx; quotation from Chase, Proper Study (1956), 307.


38. Still another indication of this belief was the 1950 decision of the Ford Foundation “to throw its great financial resources behind the effort ‘to advance human welfare’ through the application of scientific methods and techniques to the study of human behavior.” Heniz Eulau called this “a milestone in the development of modern social science” and “an act of faith . . . that social science is ready to contribute to the solution of the manifold problems which vex mankind.” Heniz Eulau, “Social Science at the Crossroads,” Antioch Review, 11 (March 1951), 117–28.


45. Erik Homburger Erikson, "Ego Development and Historical Change," *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child,* 2 (1946), 373–74, 378, 388. Gregory Bateson, "Morale and National Character," in Goodwin Watson, ed., *Civilian Morale: Second Yearbook of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues* (Boston, 1942), 71–91. There is a strong likelihood that Erikson was acquainted with Gregory Bateson’s polarities approach, since the latter was at the time married to Mead and his general assistance is acknowledged in Erikson, *Childhood and Society,* 14.

46. Erikson, *Childhood and Society,* 244.


53. This was the subtitle of Stein, Vidich, and White, eds., *Identity and Anxiety.* See also Winston White, *Beyond Conformity* (Glencoe, Ill., 1961), 50–52.


55. See chap. 6.


60. Thus in some contexts American identity has the same meaning as American character, while in others it is equivalent to American nationality. C. Vann Woodward uses identity to designate a distinctive regional heritage in his “Search for Southern Identity,” 321–38; and identity is synonymous with nationality in Morton, *Canadian Identity*.

