

# On Identity

By Alain de Benoist

*The following is a speech by Alain de Benoist at the NPI conference at The Ronald Reagan Building, Washington DC, October 26, 2013, translated from the French by Tom Sunic.*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I start off with my speech, I would like to apologize for having an obligation to inflict some pain on you! Listening to a speech in the English language with a French accent, as awful as mine, may indeed turn out to be a kind of torture for you. But rest assured: I'm much better in French!

As you can guess, the subject of my speech is the notion of identity.

In a famous passage from his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine [writes](#): “What is time? If nobody asks me about this, well, then I know its meaning, but if somebody asks me about it and if I try to explain it, I do not know it any longer.”

Saint Augustine's remarks about time could also be used regarding identity: identity poses no problems as long as nobody asks questions about it. Identity is then taken for granted; it comes as something natural. Yet a totally different situation arises the minute we ask ourselves: “Who am I?” or “Who are we?” Or better yet: “What does that mean to be an American? “, “*Qui est Français*”?, or “*Was ist deutsch?*”

It is not at all easy to talk about identity, because contrary to what many people believe (starting with those who want to defend identity), identity is not a simple concept. It is rather a very complex issue.

Identity is a complex subject because it emerges as a problem precisely at a moment when it is no longer taken as something given. In this sense identity is a typically modern subject. In traditional societies no one ever questions his identity the reason being that it is taken for granted by all, as something self-evident. Hence our first remark: it is at a moment when identity — be it individual or collective identity — is under threat, or has already disappeared, that one begins asking questions as to what identity is all about. This is the case today and this is the reason why identity has become such a burning issue, both on the political and the ideological level. Identity has become a problematic issue in the modern and the postmodern age in view of the fact that its reference points are fading away and in view of the fact that no one really knows any longer what makes the meaning of life.

However, it cannot just be a simple coincidence that identities have become so problematic in the modern age. This indicates that modernity has been a vehicle of an evolution directly harming all identities. This evolution is primarily due to the rise of individualism whose roots go to Descartes and his teachings, to say the least. In Descartes' teaching there is indeed a sublimation

of the subject that prompted this author to attribute to individualism a kind of ontological solitude, whereby the individual, in order to exist, must henceforth dispense with any community. Political atomism, which appeared in the seventeenth century, especially with the social contract theories by Grotius, Pufendorf, John Locke and others, was one of its consequences.

Another reason why the subject of identity appears so complex lies in the fact that identity, be it individual or collective, cannot be only reduced to one dimension in the life of individuals and peoples. Identity is never one-dimensional; it is multidimensional. Our identity combines inherited components with those that we choose ourselves. We have a national identity, a linguistic identity, a political identity, a cultural identity, an ethnic identity, a sexual identity, a professional identity, and so on.

All these different aspects define our objective identity. But experience teaches us that in general we do not assign them any value. This means that identity carries also a subjective dimension. In general, we define ourselves by referring to the aspect of our identity which appears as the most important and the most critical one to us while ignoring other aspects of identity. Identity is inseparable from what matters most to us. It expresses a part of ourselves that we cherish most and on which we depend on in order to construct ourselves.

But which is the part of ourselves that defines us in our opinion in the most essential manner? This is the question we need to answer when belaboring our identity.

In order to describe what matters most to us, the Canadian sociologist [Charles Taylor](#) speaks of “strong evaluations” and “constitutive goods”. “Constitutive goods” stand in a sharp contrast to material goods, or for that matter, to goods emanating from some (physical) need, in so far as they are not identifiable to simple preferences, but are, instead, the very foundations of our identity. “Strong evaluations” are characterized by the fact that they are not negotiable and cannot be reduced to a simple whim. They are not related to material well-being, but to the very *being* of ourselves. These evaluations relate to everything that provides a reason to live and to die, that is to say, they have strong bearing on the values that are conceived *as inherently* good.

Having made these preliminary remarks, I would like to mention now the two errors generally made when we talk about identity.

The first error is that our identity depends only on ourselves. In reality, though, our identity is also shaped by the intercourse we have with others, by the views we have about others and by the views others have about ourselves. An isolated subject, a man or a group living alone by himself and by itself respectively, cut off from other people or other groups, has no identity. Let us put it differently: there is no such thing as identity emerging from one’s Self only. Identity certainly means something that gives a meaning to life. However, in view of the fact that life cannot be lived on the individual level only, the subject of identity must necessarily imply a social dimension. Identity cannot be conceived independently of the social bond. This being said it is always the group that assigns an individual a part of his identity, either through history, language or institutions. This means that identity cannot be framed on the sidelines, by the subject himself, but only from the subject’s relationship with the identity of others. Every identity is fundamentally dialogical in its nature.

The statement that each identity is fundamentally dialogical means that the Other also makes up my identity because he enables me to fulfill myself. By contrast, individualism conceives of its relationship with the Other only through the perspective of mutually vested interests. From the communitarian perspective, which is also my perspective, social relationships are part of my Self. As Charles Taylor notes, the Other is also “an element of my inner identity.” A group, just as an individual, must face up to the “significant others.”

The second big mistake is defining identity as something within us that remains forever immutable and unchangeable. In this case, whether we talk about an individual or a people, identity is conceived as an essence founded on invariable and intangible attributes. Well, identity is not just an essence, or a fact-of-the-matter thing, or a static reality. It has a substance of its own and its own dynamic reality. Identity does not reflect singularity only, or a permanent nature of such singularity. Continuity also includes change, just as each definition of Self involves relationship with the Other. There cannot be any identity without the process of transformation. The important factor is that we should never look at these two terms as contradicting each other. Identity is not something unchangeable, *but rather something that we can always change without however ceasing to be ourselves*. Identity defines the method of how to change and this method belongs to us only.

Finally, I must say that identity is not just an object that needs to be discovered, but rather an object that needs to be interpreted. Human life, as was well argued by the philosophers such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, is fundamentally interpretive in its nature, that is to say, to live does not mean only describing objects, but also attempting to assign meaning to objects. Man is “an animal who interprets himself,” writes Taylor. Nor does identity escape this rule. Identity is a definition of one’s self, partly implicit, which a person belabors and redefines throughout his life. Identity is fundamentally *narrative* in its nature. It results from the story that we tell ourselves each time when we ask questions as to who we are.

### **What threatens most collective identities today?**

To this question many will respond by pointing to the phenomenon of mass immigration with most Western countries being its central stage. The severity of this phenomenon cannot be denied, nor can one deny social pathologies resulting from immigration. This view, however, in my opinion, misses the essential point because this view does not focus enough on the causes of immigration and in addition it lacks the right caliber approach.

For my part I should say that what poses the biggest threat to collective identities today is the system “that kills the peoples”, that is to say, the imposition of an across the board system of global homogenization that eliminates all human diversity, diversity of the peoples, of languages and cultures. This system is associated with the notion of global governance and the global market. Its underlying goal is the erasure of boundaries in favor of a unified world. I call this this system the ideology of Sameness and *the ideology of the Same*.

I do not belong to those who will argue that our identity is primarily threatened by the identity of others, although, of course, such a threat may exist. I think that the greatest danger weighing now upon identity does not only threaten our identity, but also the identity of other peoples. The greatest danger is the rise of *indistinction*, the erasure of differences, the destruction of popular cultures and lifestyles in a globalized world in which the only recognized values are those

expressed by the price tags, that is to say by big money. For me, the big question in the coming years will be: are we headed towards a unified, unipolar world, where differences will disappear, or are we headed to a multipolar world where identities will retain some meaning?

Asking this question inevitably leads us to the question regarding the meaning of modernity, especially the meaning of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which happened to be its driving force in the eighteenth century.

Why is the philosophy of the Enlightenment inherently hostile to collective identities? Being fundamentally slanted towards the future, it demonizes the notions of “tradition”, of “custom” of “rootedness”, and sees in those notions outdated superstitions and obstacles on its triumphal march toward progress. Having as a goal the unification of mankind, the theory of progress implies that one must therefore discard any “archaic” bondage, that is to say, refute all former bonds, and systematically destroy all organic and symbolic foundations of traditional solidarity. The dynamics of modernity tears man asunder from his natural communal ties and disregards his insertion in a specific humanity, because such notions are based on an atomistic conception of society conceived as sum total of fundamentally free and rational individuals who are supposed to choose their own goals when guiding their actions. This is why the Enlightenment heritage is opposed to the maintenance of identities.

### **American Conservatives: An Oxymoron**

Surprisingly, many American conservatives seem to be adherents of methodological individualism. They believe that the individuals are more important than the communities or collectivities. This is the reason why they are opposed to state intervention, but also to any form of economic and financial regulation which they usually associate with “socialism.” This view prevents them from understanding that disintegration of collective identities is directly linked to the rise of individualism, causing the colonization of their mindset by economic and commercial values and the generalized axiomatic of interest.

Like many Europeans, I am amazed that American conservatives defend almost unanimously the capitalist system whose expansion methodically keeps destroying everything they want to conserve. Despite the structural crisis of the capitalist system over the last couple of years, American conservatives continue with their celebration of capitalism as the only system that purportedly respects and guarantees individual liberty, private property and free trade. They believe in the intrinsic virtues of the market whose mechanism is thought to be the paradigm for all social relations. They believe that capitalism is intertwined with democracy and freedom. They believe in the necessity (and possibility) of perpetual economic growth. They think that consumption is a part of happiness, and that “more” must become synonymous with “better.”

Capitalism, however, has nothing “conservative” in itself. It is the very opposite of it! Karl Marx already observed that the dismantling of feudalism and the eradication of traditional cultures and ancient values are the result of capitalism, which in turn drowns everything in the “icy water of egotistical calculation.” Today, the capitalist system, more than ever before, is poised toward the over-accumulation of capital. It needs more trade outlets, always more and more markets, always more and more profit. Well, such a goal cannot be achieved unless it first dismantles everything that stands in its way, starting with collective identities first. A full-fledged market economy cannot operate in a sustained manner unless most people have internalized a fashionable culture,

consumption, and unlimited growth. Capitalism cannot transform the world into a vast market — which is also its main goal — unless the planet becomes fragmented and unless the planet renounces all forms of symbolic imagination which needs to be now replaced by the fever for always something new, as well as for the logic of profit and limitless accumulation.

This is the reason why capitalism, in its attempt to erase the borders, is also a system that has turned out to be much more effective than communism! The reason for this is that the economic logic places profits above everything else. Adam Smith wrote that the merchant has no homeland other than his turf where he makes the biggest profit.

And that's why capitalism bears prime responsibility for immigration. On the one hand the use of immigrants enables a downward pressure on workers' wages; on the other, the very principle of capitalism ("laissez faire, laissez passer") including free movement of people, goes hand in hand with free movement of goods and capital. Hence the reason why capital requires increased labor mobility and accordingly continuous migration of labor across national borders seen by capitalists as an obstacle to increased trade. From this point of view the world market must become the natural setting for "global citizenship."

The market society offers only a caricature of the social bond since it defines the separation from others as the only true existence. Meanwhile, it commodifies social relationship, that is to say, the relationship between citizens must turn into a carbon copy of the relationship toward and between commodities. This commodification of humans is inseparable from the logic of capitalism. From the point of view of capital, men are objects, indeed they can only be agents in the production and consumption process, and are solely interconnected through the exchange of goods.

With capitalism becoming a "total matter of factness ([M. Mauss](#)), each object must be therefore reduced to its commercial value, everything must be catalogued as merchandise, the latter being promoted to the rank of ultimate reality. Accordingly, anything that lacks its equivalent, especially monetary equivalent, must be devalued. Yet, market values, commercial values, utilitarian values, and vested interest values, as they are always arranged in terms of quantity only, are absolutely opposed to non-computable and non-measurable values which happen to be pivotal in the existence of cultures and peoples.

This is the reason why identities will remain under threat as long as we refuse to put into question all kinds of alienated life styles that are structurally related to the capitalist world view which advocates everlasting growth and limitless consumption.

I am aware this is not easy to convey to the United States, a birthplace of modern capitalism, a country which puts the individual above his community and which has always believed in the intrinsic merits of the market, in the virtues of technology, in the reality of "progress" and whose political thought, ever since the age of the Founding Fathers has been based on the key assumptions of the Enlightenment, messianic universalism, the theory of rights, and the ideology of progress.

I was asked to give my opinion. It remains for me now only to thank you for having patience to listen to me!

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