1 | *Introduction*

This book continues my investigation of so-called identity and its importance for politics. *The Politics and Ethics of Identity*, published in 2012, focuses primarily on personal identifications, although it also has something to say about collective identifications. Both have the potential to enhance status, wealth, and security, provide meaning in life, and help us come to terms with our mortality. In this volume, I analyze national identifications, the functions they serve for people, and their implications for foreign policy and international relations. By national identifications I mean not only the descriptions of states and their peoples generated by leaders and citizens alike, but also those generated by external actors.

National identifications that are internalized by people serve many of the same ends as individual self-identifications, which are, in effect, what they become. In writing about this process, Pierre Bourdieu argues that the state penetrates our innermost selves through its role in forming our language, lives, laws, identities, and feelings about the most intimate aspects of life.[1] His claim, while perhaps exaggerated, captures an essential truth because so many people identify strongly with their states and are influenced by them in ways they do not necessarily recognize. This phenomenon is even to some degree evident when people define their nationality as something distinct from, even in opposition to, their state.[2]

Identity is as central to the constructivist paradigm as power is to realism and wealth to liberalism. One of my goals is to show how deeply problematic the concept of identity is for foreign policy analysis – and for many of the same reasons that power is for realism. I believe in

---

[1] Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice* and "Identity and Representation: Elements for a Critical Reflection on the Idea of Region."

[2] McCrone and Bechhofer, *Understanding National Identity*, ch. 8, on the dual positive national identifications of the English, Scots, and Welsh.

1

the constructivist premise that we must reconstruct the world through the eyes of actors to understand their behavior. Many, if not most, people believe they have an identity. This does not mean that we have to accept its existence any more than we do that of the soul, so central to the belief system of traditional Christians. We do, however, have to acknowledge the important behavioral implications of such beliefs.[3] Toward this end, analysts must develop concepts that are intellectually defensible and methodologically useful for understanding how belief systems of all kinds influence behavior.

I question the centrality of identity for other reasons. The relationship between identifications and behavior is by no means straightforward. It is more uncertain and complex than generally recognized in the constructivist literature. In part, this is because there are multiple personal and national identifications that rise and fall in importance as a function of priming and context. Any identification, moreover, can have indeterminate implications for behavior because it usually lends itself to diverse readings. Multiple competing identifications may have opposing behavioral implications. To use identifications to explain or predict behavior we would need to know a lot more about when and how they form, the different ways people can understand the same identifications, and the conditions in which they turn to them for guidance.

Identifications are only one source of behavior. People act for many reasons that have nothing to do with their sense of who they are. They can be motivated by material or other appetites, status concerns, fear, or act out of habit. In *Constructing Cause in International Relations*, I document the important role of visual frames of reference in creating the imaginary of the territorial state and helping to make it a political project.[4] Even when self or national identifications feature prominently in a policy discourse, they may be rationalizations more than causes, giving rise to the need to differentiate between these two uses and identify the situations in which identifications are more likely to shape behavior.

The relationship between identifications and policy is further complicated by the well-documented potential of behavior at odds with the

---

[3] W. I. Thomas, *Child in America*, wrote in 1928: "[I]f people define situations as real, they are real in consequence."

[4] Lebow, *Constructing Cause in International Relations*, ch. 4.

self-identifications to prompt people to revise these self-understandings.[5]
By bringing their images of themselves in line with their behavior they
reduce dissonance. The arrow of influence points in two directions:
self-identifications help shape behavior, and behavior helps shape
self-identifications. Self-identifications also serve as rationalizations for
actions motivated by other reasons. Rationalizations can nevertheless
have important behavioral consequences when they encourage impor-
tant audiences to frame a problem in a particular war. During World
War II the American government encouraged people to think of them-
selves and their British ally as democratic countries, law abiding and
respectful of the rights of others, in contrast to their fascist adversaries.
To the extent that this self-identification was internalized, it made peo-
ple more aware of the discrepancy between their values and their treat-
ment of African Americans. Creation of the Nazi "other" may have
given a boost to civil rights.[6]

The first substantive focus of this volume is accordingly the charac-
ter of national identifications. Peter Mandler rightly notes that "Social
scientists understand much better the process by which group identifi-
cation takes place than they do what determines the content of group
identifications or even the salience of a particular group identification
in a given situation."[7] I address this problem, at least in part. I argue
that national identifications, like their individual counterparts, are
based primarily on roles, affiliations, relationship to bodies – territory
and people in the case of states – and ethnic and state histories. The
most attractive national identifications – and hence, those most likely
to be internalized – are those that emphasize the alleged distinctive-
ness and positive qualities, if not superiority, of a state and its citizens.
Identifications of this kind build and buttress self-esteem and, by doing
so, provide the psychological foundations of nationalism. The exclu-
sivity of any formulation of nationalism and nationality will depend
in part on the ways in which claims of distinctiveness and superiority
are constructed.

---

[5] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.82; Bem, "Self-Perception"
and "Self-Perception Theory."
[6] I elaborate this theme in *Franz Ferdinand Lives!* chs. 3–4, and consider the
counterfactual possibility of how civil rights would have been considerably
delayed in the absence of World War II.
[7] Mandler, "What Is 'National Identity'?"

National identifications can build self-esteem directly and indirectly. Citizens feel good about themselves when they belong to a nationality or state they consider superior. They take vicarious pride in the accomplishments of their people or state.[8] Some psychologists theorize that affiliation with nations is also a means of coping with mortality.[9] For all these reasons leaders and peoples assert claims of distinctiveness and superiority and attempt to get them recognized by other actors in regional and international societies. Regional, and later international, society legitimized the role of great power. In the aftermath of World War II, the role of superpower gained widespread acceptance, and, for decades, the United States has been seeking recognition as a hegemon. States have also been allowed, if not encouraged, to carve out high-status roles as regional and middle powers. Switzerland and Sweden transformed the initially low-status role of neutral into a high-status one. Much of international relations can be characterized as a struggle for high-status roles and the privileges they confer, but also of transforming low-status roles into high-status ones. Needless to say, internal – that is, domestic – understandings of roles are not always the same as external ones, and these differences can become sources of tension and conflict.

In the modern age, the intensity of conflicts associated with national identifications and roles has been exacerbated by the greater degree to which people identify with their states. This invariably involves some degree of transference, a phenomenon well documented with regard to sports teams.[10] Individual self-esteem becomes a function, at least in part, of the success and failure of one's state and teams. As Carl von Clausewitz presciently observed in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, conflicts and wars were no longer between princes, but between peoples.[11]

There is a close but complicated connection between national identifications and foreign policy. This is the second focus of my book: how

---

[8] Lebow, *Cultural Theory of International Relations*, develops and documents these claims.

[9] Ibid., chs. 3 and 8. For a general review of the terror management literature, see Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, "The Cultural Animal."

[10] Dechesne, Greenberg, Arndt, and Schimel, "Terror Management and Sports Fan Affiliation"; Castano, Yzerbyt, and Paladino, "Fan Affiliation"; Castano and Dechesne, "On Defeating Death"; Castano, "In Case of Death, Cling to the Ingroup."

[11] Clausewitz, *On War*, ch. 26.

national identifications not only influence foreign policy and interna-
tional relations, but also how they in turn help shape national iden-
tifications. This relationship is recursive. Success and failure in the
competition for regional or international status – sought as an end in
itself, but also for instrumental reasons – will affect the character and
relative appeal of particular national identifications. Changes in iden-
tifications or their importance can in turn encourage, provide support
for, or even require changes in foreign policy. For this reason, among
others, domestic and foreign actors are keen to influence national
identifications of their states and others.

There is another, circuitous but more profound connection
between national identifications and foreign policy: changes in
national identifications in multiple countries can affect the character
of international relations, and vice versa. I approach this relationship
through an examination of the principles of justice that sustain and
justify political orders. I argue that national identifications represent
claims for special treatment, and to do so successfully they must
ultimately rest on a widely accepted principle of justice. Changes
in the appeal of relative acceptance and understandings of the prin-
ciples of fairness and equality have important implications for the
appeal and utility of national identifications – and also for regional
and international practices. Leaders interested in the instrumental
benefits of national identifications will accordingly have incentives
to reframe them in response. If enough leaders act this way, they
have the potential to transform the character of international soci-
ety and its practices.

I contend that there are only two fundamental principles of dis-
tributive justice: fairness and equality. Each finds two forms of
expression. Fairness dictates that more should be given to those who
provide more for the community, or to those who need more. Equality
requires an even distribution of material and symbolic awards, or
equal access to them in a fair completion. All orders excepting those
based on fear incorporate one or both principles, although rarely, if
ever, do they approach them in practice.

From ancient times until the Enlightenment, fairness was the
dominant principle of distributive justice. By the nineteenth cen-
tury, even conservatives like Talleyrand, Tocqueville, and Bismarck
recognized that equality was rapidly becoming the dominant
value and would have far-reaching implications for the practice of

European politics.[12] This value shift, I argue, is an important underlying reason why war and conquest have become increasingly unacceptable. It is wrong to explain these phenomena only with reference to learning from events, notably the two world wars and the threat of nuclear Armageddon.[13]

National identifications have been influenced by the principle of equality, but this has not stopped states from violating that principle and seeking special treatment from regional or international societies. There is a more general contradiction between the principle of equality and most national identifications. They almost invariably assert the distinctiveness and superiority of a people or nation. Claims of superiority and justifications for privileges based on them are really appeals to the principle of fairness and to hierarchy at the expense of equality. Elites who propagate these identifications and claims invoke all kinds of sleights of hand in an attempt to square the two principles, but rarely credibly in the eyes of other actors.

There are exceptions, of course. Not all national identifications defy the principle of equality. Herder thought all peoples distinctive but none superior; collectively, they expressed the diverse potential of humanity.[14] Some expressions of nationalism adhere to this principle to varying degrees. Others emphasize collective affiliations, as do postwar German efforts to define themselves as good Europeans. Identifications based on ideologies such as democracy are also collective in the sense of recognizing positive similarities between their states and peoples and others. Their leaders may still encourage the framing of "us" and "others" binaries, as do post–Cold War efforts by interventionist-prone Americans to create a "concert of democracies."[15]

---

[12] Talleyrand-Périgord, *Correspondence of Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord and King Louis XVIII*, p. 289; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, II.2.1, p. 482.

[13] See Lebow, *Why Nations Fight*, for one such explanation.

[14] Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*.

[15] Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, "An Alliance of Democracies": Our Way or the Highway," 6 November 2004, http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2004/11/06globalgovernance-daalder; Richard Perle, "Democracies of the World, Unite," *The American Interest* 2, no. 3, 1 January 2007, http://www.the-american-interest.com/2007/01/01/democracies-of-the-world-unite/ (both accessed 7 July 2015); Davenport, "Just War Theory Requires a New Federation of Democratic Nations"; Robert Kagan, "The Case for a League of Democracies," *Financial Times*, 13 May 2008; Archibugi, *The Global Commonwealth of Citizens*.

My analysis accordingly has four starting points. First and foremost, and noted at the outset, is the rejection of the concept of identity on the grounds that neither individuals nor states possess one. So-called identities are really composites of multiple self-identifications that are labile in character and rise and fall in relative importance. They arise from diverse sources and have unpredictable behavioral implications.[16] States also have multiple identifications, not single identities. As with individuals, these identifications are based on their roles, affiliations, relationships to their bodies – territory and population in the case of states – and understandings people have of their past. Because national identifications have important political consequences, they are invariably contested. To the degree they are widely shared, they can be appealed to in support of policies made to appear consistent with them. Diverse actors accordingly propagate identifications consistent with their political goals or psychological needs and attempt to impose them on their states. They usually attempt to do this by influencing official or collective memories.

My second starting point concerns the principal difference between individual and national identifications. States have no psyche and accordingly no reflexive self. In the language of George Herbert Mead, they have a "Me" but not an "I." They are unable to construct identifications on their own or discriminate among those foisted on them by others. It is more appropriate to speak of state "identifications" than "self-identifications," and to recognize that these identifications are imposed on states, not only by leaders and other officials, but also by the media, public intellectuals, interest and ethnic groups, and external actors.

My third starting point emphasizes another important difference between states and people. In many, if not most, states, people live in relatively robust societies, and within them, in even more robust, subcultures. Regional and international societies are much thinner than most national ones and have correspondingly less ability to shape the identifications of their members. They have some influence in this regard, and exercise it primarily through the units they recognize as actors, the roles they legitimize, and their pairing of actors and roles.

International society differs from democratic domestic societies and most regional societies in its greater degree of hierarchy. Max Weber observed that larger and powerful states seek special privileges and "their pretensions may influence the external conduct of the power

16 See Lebow, *Politics and Ethics of Identity*, ch. 1 for an elaboration of this claim.

structures."[17] This situation has not changed. Great powers exercise more influence than ordinary states, and leaders of great powers assert their right to rule on the basis of their ability to maintain order, which they describe as in the common interests.[18] The United States has attempted to push this claim and related privileges much further in its claim to hegemony and assertion of its beneficial consequences.[19]

My fourth starting point pertains to the nature of regional and international societies. They should be analyzed as societies, not as systems. States and nonstate actors interact within a cultural framework that legitimizes and assigns roles that create and sustain hierarchies and practices. In the final section to this chapter I elaborate this framing and offer a critique of the concept of system as it has been applied to international relations. The gist of the critique is that systemic analysis privileges the so-called structure of the system over the actors, and attributes their behavior to constraints and opportunities generated by the system. A social approach, by contrast, is bottom up and explains actor behavior with reference to their values and goals. Their interactions create expectations and practices, some of which may be institutionalized. They in turn influence actors. There is an ongoing interaction between actors and their societies, with changes in either one affecting the membership, roles, and practices of the other.

This volume carries forward the research program associated with *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, *Why Nations Fight*, and *Goodbye Hegemony!* It does so by highlighting the variation among states in their ability to respond and adapt to changing circumstances. Following the approach of these previous works, I frame the constraints and opportunities actors face more in reference to values and ideas than to power. To achieve standing and influence, states must convince others of their worth and of the benefits to others of the roles they seek and the policies they advocate. Influence accordingly depends at least as much on political choices and rhetorical skills as it does on material capabilities. Material capabilities count for little unless they are invested wisely to acquire the kind of resources appropriate to and useful for exercising influence in pathways recognized by

---

[17] Weber, *Economy and Society*, II, pp. 910–11.
[18] Clark, *Hierarchy of States*, pp. 1–3, 210, 217–18.
[19] Reich and Lebow, *Good-Bye Hegemony!*, ch. 1.

others as legitimate. National identifications can be critical resources
or impediments in this regard.

This book aspires to make two general contributions to the inter-
national relations theory literature. It offers insight into international
and domestic change by exploring national identifications, which
I contend are one of the most important vehicles for such change. Of
equal importance, it offers evidence of the utility of analyzing inter-
national relations in terms of influence rather than power, and of the
social vs. material basis of influence.

Book Outline

Ontological security is the framework adopted by many constructiv-
ists to study identity and its foreign policy consequences. Drawing on
Anthony Giddens, ontological security assumes that people and states
require a stable sense of self that is provided by an identity and associ-
ated organizational routines. Chapter 2 offers a critique of this research
program. I distinguish states from people; the former have neither emo-
tions nor psychological needs. Their leaders and people certainly do,
and may project them onto states. This process of transference creates a
powerful set of expectations about the domestic and foreign policies of
states, but they are more complex in their character and consequences
than theorized by proponents of ontological security.

Like people, states have multiple identities, and much of politics
consists of efforts by leaders, domestic and foreign political actors,
to impose identifications on states commensurate with their political
and psychological needs. States accordingly have multiple, compet-
ing identifications, many incommensurate and in competition in the
discourses of official and civil society. These identifications and their
supporting narratives often appeal to and enhance the self-esteem and
solidarity of different political actors and subgroups within a society.
Competing identifications and the conflicts they generate can con-
strain or provide freedom for policymakers, depending on the cir-
cumstances. They can generate culture wars that lead to ontological
insecurity.

Ontological security makes an unwarranted assumption about the
relationship between stress and routines. Stress can encourage actors
to take refuge in routines, but it can also provide an incentive to reject
them. All governments rely on routines, but it is not evident that

psychological explanations, as opposed to organizational and bureau-
cratic ones, are necessary to account for them. In the conclusion to
this chapter, I suggest ways in which research on so-called identity
and foreign policy could be put on firmer political and psychological
foundations.

Chapter 3 employs George Herbert Mead's distinction between
"Me" and "I" to analyze the similarities and differences between indi-
vidual and states. The "Me" refers to the understandings imposed
on one by other actors, and the "I" to self-understandings. The two
are often in conflict because people frequently dislike the way oth-
ers categorize them. For most people there is an ongoing, negotiable
relationship between these two selves.[20] We can properly use the term
"self-identifications" because people assimilate socially constructed
identifications, reflect on and modify them, and not infrequently
invent their own. People do not feel good about negative attribu-
tions or identifications that they consider low in status, although
research on stereotypes suggests that these identifications are often
internalized.[21]

States are legal entities and imagined communities and do not pos-
sess a collective consciousness that can reflect on themselves and their
situations. For this reason, they have no "I" in the sense that Mead
defines it. States are composed of multiple institutions and actors. The
latter include leaders, bureaucrats, politicians seeking office, media
representatives, public intellectuals, pressure and affinity groups of
all kinds, and ordinary citizens. These actors propagate and publicize
diverse national identifications in support of their political goals and
psychological needs.

The state might be analogized to a refrigerator on which family
members use small magnets to attach snapshots, postcards, lists, notes,
and other objects. By doing so, they personalize the appliance and
make it reflect their interests, needs, commitments, and hopes. The
refrigerator has no say in the matter. Many families have refrigerators
with large enough doors to accommodate many different magnetized
objects. Through these objects the family refrigerator receives an iden-
tity, really multiple identities, as there is rarely anything coherent or

---

[20] Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*.
[21] Goffman, *Stigma*; Moncrieffe and Eyben, *Power of Labeling*; Heatherton,
Social Psychology of Stigma.