



Reconsidering Identity

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Abstract. – The paper discusses and defends the analytical usefulness of the concept of identity which has been pervasively criticized by authors like Richard Handler or Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper. Starting with reviewing the problematic of concepts in social anthropology and continuing with discussing the rise of identity discourse, it is argued that concepts in social and cultural sciences are always suspended between their employment in scientific and in nonscientific discourse. This dual hermeneutics of concepts is, however, not a shortcoming which has to be overcome but a productive element that contributes to their refinement. It is argued that in the case of identity dual hermeneutics leads to a reconceptualization of identity as qualified by the conditions of difference, multiplicity, and intersectionality. In the final parts of the paper, implications of this reconceptualization of identity for a concept of self are explored. [*Theory, identity, self*]

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1 Introduction

The intention of this paper is to explore the concept of identity generally, not limited to a specific ethnographic context, although I will draw on such contexts. The concept of identity has recently come under heavy attack. Two directions of critique seem to be of particular weight. The first of these denies that identity is a useful concept in cross-cultural context (Handler 1994; Rouse 1995), and the second argues that identity has been

charged with so many different meanings that it has ceased to be meaningful at all and should be replaced by a range of other, more specific concepts (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Both arguments contribute importantly to the questioning of "identity" and they certainly have to be taken very seriously. However, I am still of the opinion that "identity" does important work within the social and cultural sciences. My text will, therefore, be a defence of "identity" – if certainly a defence with a great deal of reservation derived from the understanding that "identity" today is indeed an overused concept that should be employed with much more caution and stricture. I argue that a concept of identity has to be seen in close connection with a concept of self and that both have political implications which have to be taken into account.

Before entering the debate, however, I will dwell a little on the general difficulty of concepts in social anthropology because in my opinion the quality of "identity" as a *concept* has an important impact on the contents and understanding of identity which has to be considered. I could also say that I am writing mainly about concepts in social anthropology, taking "identity" as example. What I am doing, then, is essentially the business of reflexivity.

2 Concepts in Social Anthropology

Social anthropology, like all social and cultural sciences, is to a great extent a trade in concepts. The proposition for which I am arguing here is that