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The Identity of Identity

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Abstract:

In *Identity: A Very Short Introduction*, Florian Coulmas refers to an “obsession” (p.1) gripping the world: obsession with identity. In this pocket-size, concise book, he introduces different aspects of identity to demystify this concept in our age. Unlike many books on identity, this volume goes far beyond social and cultural aspects and touches upon the less argued spheres; it examines identity in areas such as philosophy, logics, linguistics, and literature. This book is a successful effort to show why ‘identity’, not just as a term in book titles, but as a concept in human beings’ everyday life, has dominated our world. Identity is as much about sameness as it is about difference. Being constituted of two opposite poles, identity has been and is a mystery to the human mind. After reading this short pocket-size volume, one becomes familiar with different notions of the term ‘identity’ and the traces of its constituents sameness, difference, self, and other in various contexts.

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The Identity of Identity

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Coulmas, Florian: *Identity: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 147 pages, 8.24 GBP. ISBN: 978-0-19-882854-9.

Abstract:

In *Identity: A Very Short Introduction*, Florian Coulmas refers to an “obsession” (p.1) gripping the world: obsession with identity. In this pocket-size, concise book, he introduces different aspects of identity to demystify this concept in our age. Unlike many books on identity, this volume goes far beyond social and cultural aspects and touches upon the less argued spheres; it examines identity in areas such as philosophy, logics, linguistics, and literature. This book is a successful effort to show why ‘identity’, not just as a term in book titles, but as a concept in human beings’ everyday life, has dominated our world. Identity is as much about sameness as it is about difference. Being constituted of two opposite poles, identity has been and is a mystery to the human mind. After reading this short pocket-size volume, one becomes familiar with different notions of the term ‘identity’ and the traces of its constituents sameness, difference, self, and other in various contexts.

The frequency of the term ‘identity’ in book titles in recent decades affirms its ubiquity (p.2). Many books have been written on identity; however, what distinguishes Coulmas’s introduction is that he goes beyond identity as cultural constructionism and explores this term in a wide range of scientific spheres such as philosophy, logic, anthropology, law, linguistics, and literature. In an introductory book with eleven chapters, Coulmas, a German linguist and senior professor for Japanese society and sociolinguistics, has tried to introduce this now popular and contested concept.

The first chapter explores identity in philosophy. The main idea of the chapter is to see how sense of self survives through time and what the relation between mind and body is. By posing four insightful questions, such as “when and how is a body ensouled?” (p. 11), Coulmas refers to the difficulty and inability of locating the *I* or *Self*. Nevertheless, by giving examples such as death, Alzheimer’s, brain lesions, or abortion (p.12) he shows to what extent the *Self* is dependent on body. Chapter two

examines how identity or being identical might differ in different logics. Coulmas argues that classical logics do not help to fully grasp identity; therefore, he proposes non-Western logics proposed by Buddhist philosophers such as Dignaga (480 CE- 540 CE) and Darmakriti (died 660 CE) whose logics differ from Aristotelian tradition and view every concept as including its own negation as a property, rather than absence of properties.

In chapter 3, Coulmas explores constructive notions of identity, especially in relation to ethnicity. Inua Ellams, a Nigerian poet, said in an interview with The Guardian in 2017 that 'I became a black man when I arrived in England' (p. 27); Coulmas uses this example to show to what extent identity can be ascribed by Others and adjust itself to changing circumstances in a given society. He argues, to find the *Self*, 'I' and 'we' are not independent in forming the senses of self.

Transformations in gender identity is theme of the fourth chapter. It starts with the sex-gender binary, which has been undoubtedly a turning-point in feminist movements, and stresses the constructive role of social and cultural discourses and/or power relations over biological ones in forming gender identities.

Chapter 5 touches upon self-determination in politics. The number of independent states in 1917 and 2017 are respectively 59 and 195 (p.55), which is already indicative of the endeavor to reach self-determination on a political level. Coulmas believes that arguments about identity in politics revolve either around subnational issues focused on ethnicities and group affiliations or around supranational issues like Western, Islamic, and Sinic civilizations (64).

Transformations of social identities in a historical overview are the subject of Chapter 6. Coulmas points out the fact that, due to economic and industrial changes, strategies to include peers and exclude others have changed and class divisions have been replaced by ethnic ones (p.77). He believes that even though there have been some profound changes in economic structures, inequality persists. He sees the obsession with identity, especially since the late 20th century, as a consequence of the non-stop struggle to draw boundaries between Self and Other in different formats.

"Identity as a legal concept" is discussed in Chapter 7. By not confining his argument to citizenship regimes (*jus sanguinis* or *jus soli*), Coulmas goes beyond governmental policies to determine the legal status of individuals. He refers to statuses of abnormal cases such as identical twins, dead people, demented ones, and undocumented foreigners to show some pitfalls in determining identity in a legal sense.

In chapter 8, Coulmas puts an emphasis on active identification processes and proposes “identity as act” (p. 97). He argues that “everybody always acts; which means that personal identity, rather than being given, is created in the interaction of self with others” (p. 97).

Identity in linguistics is observed in chapter 9. Coulmas focuses on language and its potential, both at verbal and written level to demarcate individuals, groups, nations, races, etc. Language is, therefore, a tool to manifest identity and difference. Coulmas stays at this level in this chapter and doesn't go further. Since he is dealing with linguistics and identity, it would be pertinent to refer to linguistic schools such as structuralism and post-structuralism, especially the latter, which has been essential in showing that identity is more of a construction than a fixed, unified reality.

Chapter 10 “Identity in Literature”, shows how the issue of identity is used in past and present literature. Different perspectives are reviewed: persistence through time (e.g. in *The Odyssey*), mistaken identity (e.g. in *Comedy of Errors* by Shakespeare), split identity (as in Goethe's *Faust*), doppelgänger (as in *The Double* by Dostoevsky), body and mind (Kafka's 'Metamorphosis'), lost in modernity (e.g. in Albert Camus's *The Stranger*) (p.116-121). Besides these themes in literature, Coulmas refers to the potential of literature itself to communicate identity e.g. by using symbolic techniques that evoke features of speech to insinuate certain characteristics such as ethnic, gender, regional and social identity markers (p.124). Pointing to style in literature as a marker of identity for authors is another good example which shows Coulmas's preciseness in tracing identity in different spheres.

Comprehensiveness is a strong point of the book, for different notions of identity are covered in a pocket-sized 131-pages volume. Being able to put many aspects of 'identity' in such limited space is admirable. The structure of the book does not let the writer go into much detail; however, there are suggestions at the end of the book for further reading. All in all, this concise volume is helpful to those wishing to be introduced (however briefly) to the identity of one of the most contested concepts of our time, 'identity'.

German Abstract:

Identität von Identität

In *Identity: A Very Short Introduction* bezieht sich Florian Coulmas auf eine „obsession“ (S. 1), die die Welt erfasst: Besessenheit von Identität. In diesem prägnanten Taschenbuch führt er verschiedene Aspekte der Identität ein, um dieses Konzept für unsere Gegenwart zu entmystifizieren. Im Gegensatz zu vielen Büchern über Identität geht dieser Band weit über soziale und kulturelle Aspekte hinaus und berührt weniger diskutiertere Bereiche wie Identität in Philosophie, Logik, Linguistik und Literatur. Es zeigt erfolgreich auf, warum ‚Identität‘ nicht nur als Begriff in Buchtiteln, sondern als Begriff im menschlichen Alltag unsere Welt dominiert hat. Bei Identität geht es ebenso um Gleichheit wie um Differenz und durch diese beiden entgegengesetzten Pole war und ist Identität dem menschlichen Verstand ein Rätsel. Nach dem Lesen dieses kurzen Bands im Taschenformat werden den Lesenden verschiedene Aspekte des Begriffs ‚Identität‘ und die Spuren seiner Bestandteile Gleichheit, Differenz, Selbst und Anderes in verschiedenen Zusammenhängen auf interessante Weise nähergebracht.

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