

The plumage and the bird: We need to reappraise what is 'essential' and what 'superfluous' in political life



Political theories have often included frameworks that minimize the importance of some aspects of human flourishing and prioritize others. [Rodney Barker](#) takes issue with these distinctions, arguing for the fundamental importance of cultural choices and display in understanding human conduct.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the conservative Edmund Burke denounced the revolutionary regime in France and defended monarchy and aristocracy. In reply the radical author Tom Paine complained that Burke pitied the plumage, but forgot the dying bird.

Burke or other defenders of tradition or hierarchy could have replied (but in fact did not) that without the plumage the bird is not a bird at all. Without its feathers, the bird can neither fly nor swim, attract mates or hide from predators. The feathers are neither additions to the bird nor expressions of the bird. They are inherently part of what the bird is, as any bird spotter would have told Paine.

But Paine was drawing on an ancient view of core versus superficialities, essence versus accidents, internal substance versus external display, or basis versus superstructure. This contrast has long served to set aside inconvenient evidence or dismiss some of what is seen as superficial or without significance as 'mere rhetoric' or epiphenomenal froth. Yet at the same time the dichotomy assumed an underlying but not immediately evident truth, nature, essence or purpose.

What applies to birds applies with even greater force to humans, animals who wear not only their own skin and hair, but that of other creatures as well. We add to and extend our own 'plumage' by creating for ourselves second and third skins – which are as much a part of who we are as are the feathers of the sparrow or the plumes of the peacock. Nor is human plumage, as a tangible component of human identity, limited to clothing however widely interpreted. It consists of the whole complex cultivation of both conduct and environment – from all the visible and audible elements of individual identity to the created physical environment which its members inhabit.

Clothing and diet, language and architecture, are all part of the plumage of humans. Being chosen and cultivated, as well as given and received, these artefacts can say even more than the plumage of the ostrich or the coot. They are part of the cultivation of an identity which differentiates one society from another, one household from another, and one person from another. The plumage of a bird will show to which species it belongs. Human plumage will show important elements not just of acquired or imposed identities, but also of those created and cultivated.

If an initial impression is sought of what kind of society, government, polity, group or individual is being looked at, then the visible, tangible, and audible expressions they give of themselves, and the ways in which they give them, are at the very least an essential first piece of evidence. People cultivate who they are by association with others. They are Hindus, Christians, atheists; Arsenal supporters or Chelsea; fox-hunters or surfers.

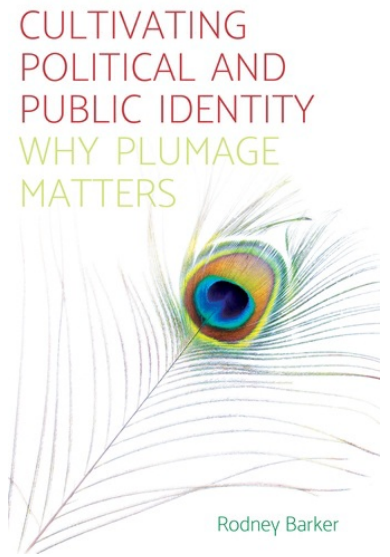
But the search for identity through solidarity is constantly countered by the opposite pull towards individual distinctiveness and superiority. When everyone is a comrade, comrade generals and comrade commissars swiftly emerge. Whenever visible and audible character express equality by solidarity and association, there soon begins a recession towards rank, or hierarchy, or exclusion, or ascendancy.

Identity might seem of secondary importance if the politics of the twenty first century become a series of contests, often bitter and violent, over natural resources – such as water, oil, minerals, and land capable of producing food in a world approaching or entering a time of limited resources and continued population growth. It might appear that a politics of identity will be outweighed by a politics of interest or of biologically grounded needs.

However, that would be to misrepresent the relation between interest and identity, and between ubiquitous needs and their particular expression and pursuit. Narratives of identity provide the language for the distribution, and the restriction of the distribution, of resources between the various classes, groups and categories into which competing claimants divide the human population. Humans wish to survive, and to survive and flourish physically, materially. But the way in which they wish to survive and flourish can be as important to them as the mere fact of survival and flourishing.

Material survival is never simply material survival with no further human dimension. It is always the survival of real people and, crucially, of their identity. Human political activity will never be a simple reflection of objective and universally recognised and accepted economic interests. The parties to any contest will be shaped by shared identities. But not only is identity – national, ethnic, religious, ideological – the coinage of material interest. The survival and flourishing of a cultural identity again and again takes priority over physical survival.

If that were not the case, war would be difficult or impossible, and revolutions and resistance restricted to publication and protest. Current violence is no more than an intense and menacing proof of this perennial feature of politics. And when political conflict is condemned as an irrational blindness to material wellbeing, people have forgotten that the wellbeing of identity can have an equal or even greater force than mere physical well-being, or even physical survival. Depending on where and when identities collide, the consequences of the wrong colour shirt or the wrong language or accent can be anything from being ignored or snubbed to being attacked or assassinated.



Note: the above draws on Rodney Barker's new book ([freely available](#)), '*Cultivating political and public identity: Why plumage matters*'. A video discussion is also available [here](#). Rodney Barker will discuss the book at a free LSE event on 28 September 2017 (for details see [here](#)).

About the Author



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