Identity and International Relations
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Abstract

Drawing on Kant and Hegel, debates in political theory and international relations generally assume that an identity cannot be created without the simultaneous creation and negative stereotype of an ‘other’. Figures such as Schmitt and Huntington accept and even welcome this binary, while others, among them Nietzsche, Habermas and Rawls, look for ways of overcoming it. Drawing on Homer’s *Iliad* and psychological research, I challenge the assumptions on which Kant and Hegel, and their successors, build their argument. The Greco-Roman literary tradition and recent survey and experimental research indicates that identities generally form *prior* to construction of ‘others’, that ‘others’ need not be associated with negative stereotypes, and that even when they are, boundaries between in- and outgroups are quite plastic. Nor must stereotypes be negative. Homer and modern history suggest that identity construction and maintenance often take place through positive, although not necessarily equal, interactions with ‘others’.

Keywords: Gordon Allport, constructivism, Jürgen Habermas, G. W. F. Hegel, Homer, identity, Immanuel Kant, ‘other’, F. Nietzsche, stereotype

John Herz never wrote about the Greeks but he thought like one. The Greeks valued an approach to life and politics based on the *meden agan*, which can be translated as the ‘middle way’, or ‘nothing in excess’. John’s postwar writings advocate a theory of international relations and an approach to the practice of foreign policy that try to strike a middle ground between realpolitik and idealism. His liberal variant of realism recognizes the pervasive importance of power in international affairs, but also attempts to limit its exercise through international law and institutions. As John put it so aptly in the preface to one of his major works: ‘The human cause will be lost if the liberal ideal is forgotten, even as surely as it is lost if left to the utopian Political Idealist.’

This article honours John by following his recognition that the middle way, while complex, inelegant and more difficult to defend intellectually, is generally a better guide for policy than a single-minded commitment to some vision of the world that only achieves coherence at the expense of reality. The middle way in this article is represented in the first instance by my turn to the Greeks, and in particular to the writings of Homer. To the extent that one can speak of the *Iliad* as generating lessons – and classical Greeks most certainly believed that it did – its principal one is the need for moderation and compromise, especially on the part of the powerful. For leaders of great powers such a mindset also has the great advantage of discouraging them from transformative international projects likely to lead to disaster because they are rooted in ideological certainty. John wrote in the aftermath of World War II and during the height of the Cold War. The tragedy of the Iraq War drives home the contemporary relevance of his concerns and the need to sensitize the next generation of students and policymakers to more nuanced ways of thinking and behaving.
With this goal in mind, I turn my attention to a topic that John never addressed in any detail but which was central to his professional concerns and personal life. This is the concept of the ‘other’ in international relations. Stereotypy of outgroups and the hostility it facilitates towards them makes it easier to mobilize support for war, ethnic cleansing and genocide. John became a hated ‘other’ in his native Germany and courageously opposed racial prejudice and imperial wars in his adopted homeland. Some philosophers (e.g. Kant and Hegel) consider creation of ‘others’ a necessary adjunct to state formation and national solidarity, although they recognize an underlying common human identity. Others (e.g. Nietzsche and Habermas) hope to transcend this dangerous binary through dialogue. This debate, like so many in moral philosophy, takes place in an empirical vacuum. As in the struggle between Realpolitik and liberal idealism, it pits claims of practicality (this is how the world works) against those of betterment (this is how it should be). John would almost certainly seek a ‘middle way’ – an approach to identity that took into account established practices while striving to improve them.

Following John’s example, I attempt to offer a more complex understanding of identity and the diverse roles that ‘others’ play in its construction and maintenance. To do so, I draw in the first instance on empirical evidence from surveys and laboratory research conducted by psychologists. I then turn to Homer’s *Iliad*, the founding text of a literary tradition that frames the problem of identity and ‘others’ very differently than Kant, Hegel and their successors. This tradition – represented by Vergil in Roman times and Joyce and others in the twentieth century – is worth highlighting because its approach to identity is more consonant with the findings of modern psychology. I conclude with a discussion of some of the links between this tradition, psychological evidence and modern practice.

The philosophy of identity

Identity is one of those concepts whose meaning was always fluid but in recent years has become stretched to avoid the charge of ‘essentialism’. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper identify five key uses for the term. Identity can be understood as a ground or basis for social or political action, a collective phenomenon denoting some degree of sameness among members of a group or category, a core aspect of individual or collective ‘selfhood’, a product of social or political action, or the product of multiple and competing discourses. They note the irony that constructivist notions of identity now so much in vogue provide no insight into the process by which coercion is used to compel identification. Their recognition of multiple fluid identities also stands in sharp contrast to ‘the terrible singularity that is often striven for – and sometimes realized – by politicians seeking to transform mere categories into unitary and exclusive groups’.  

In philosophy, political science and politics, identity construction has routinely been assumed to require the creation of ‘others’, if not their demonization. The most extreme formulation of the claim is Carl Schmitt’s assertion that political identities can best be formed in the course of violent struggles against adversaries. There is considerable historical evidence for such a claim, beginning with the ancient Israelites. In modern times politicians and intellectuals have routinely created or exploited dichotomies between ‘us’ and ‘others’ to advance racist and authoritarian political agendas. A recent and prominent example is Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* which constructs Latin immigrants as an unassimilatable ‘other’ and Islam as an external ‘other’ that threatens our economic
primacy and physical security. Following 9/11, the Bush administration had notable success in mobilizing support for its ‘war on terror’ and invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq by convincing many Americans that the world was divided into good ‘freedom-loving peoples’ and evil ‘cowardly terrorists’.

The ‘us’ and ‘other’ binary has a long and distinguished lineage. It was first conceptualized in the eighteenth century in response to efforts by Western European governments to promote domestic cohesion and development by means of foreign conflict. Immanuel Kant theorized that the ‘unsocial sociability’ of people draws them together into societies, but leads them to act in ways that threaten their dissolution. He considered this antagonism innate to our species and an underlying cause of the development of the state. Warfare drove people apart, but their need to defend themselves against others compelled them to band together and submit to the rule of law. Each political unit has unrestricted freedom in the same way individuals did before the creation of societies, and hence is in a constant state of war. The price of order at home is conflict among societies. The ‘us’ is maintained at the expense of ‘others’.

Hegel built on this formulation, and brought to it his understanding that modern states differed from their predecessors in that cohesion does not rest so much on pre-existing cultural, religious or linguistic identities as it does on the allegiance of their citizens to central authorities who provide for the common defence. Citizens develop a collective identity through the external conflicts of their state and the sacrifices it demands of them. ‘States’, he writes in ‘The German Constitution’, ‘stand to one another in a relation of might’, a relationship that ‘has been universally revealed and made to prevail’. In contrast to Kant, who considers this situation tragic, Hegel rhapsodizes about the life of states as active and creative agents who play a critical role in the unfolding development of the spirit and humankind. Conflict among states, he contends, helps each to become aware of itself by encouraging self-knowledge among citizens. It can serve an ethical end by uniting subjectivity and objectivity and resolving the tension between particularity and universality. After Hegel, peace came to be seen as a negotiated agreement between and among European states, and not the result of some civilizing process.

International relations as a zone of conflict and war was further legitimized by the gradual development of international law and its conceptualization of international relations as intercourse among sovereign states. In the seventeenth century, Grotius, Hobbes and Pufendorf endowed states with moral personalities and sought to constrain them through a reciprocal set of rights and duties. In the eighteenth century, the state was further embedded in a law of nations by Vattel. The concept of sovereignty created the legal basis for the state and the nearly unrestricted right of its leaders to act as they wished within its borders. It also justified the pursuit of national interests by force beyond those borders so long as it was in accord with the laws of war. Sovereignty is a concept with diverse and even murky origins, that was first popularized in the sixteenth century. At that time, more importance was placed on its domestic than its international implications. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century jurists and historians, many of them Germans influenced by Kant and Hegel (e.g. Heeren, Clausewitz, Ranke, Treitschke) developed a narrative about sovereignty that legitimized the accumulation of power of central governments and portrayed the state as the sole focus of a people’s economic, political and social life. The ideology of sovereignty neatly divided actors from one another, and made the binary of ‘us’ and ‘others’ appear a natural, if not progressive, development, as did rule-based warfare among states.
This binary also found expression in the concept of a European or Christian society, which initially excluded Russia and the Ottoman Empire as political and cultural ‘others’. There was no conception of the ‘international’ until the late eighteenth century, and its development refected and hastened the transformation of European society into an international system in the course of the next century. New standards of legitimacy enlarged the boundaries of the community of nations following the Napoleonic War. By 1900, non-Western states were being admitted to the community, and the number of such units burgeoned with decolonization in the late 1950s and 1960s. In recent decades, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and diverse social movements have pushed a more cosmopolitan notion of democracy that extends to units beyond states and challenges the legitimacy of many recognized international organizations.

Efforts to expand the conception of self and community always meet strong opposition. In 1859, John Stuart Mill held that it was a ‘grave error’ to ‘suppose that the same international customs, and the same rules of international morality, can obtain between one civilized nation and another, and between civilized nations and barbarians’. Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* makes the same kind of invidious distinctions. Basing their claims on Kant, but really acting in the tradition of Mill, liberal advocates of the Democratic Peace update his dichotomy to divide the world into liberal states and authoritarian ‘others’. In sharp contradiction of Kant’s categorical imperative, some liberals justify economic penetration or military intervention to bring the benefits of democracy to these states and their peoples. American domestic and foreign policy since 9/11 indicate how easy it remains for political leaders to exploit fear of ‘others’ to create solidarity at home.

The self–other binary also draws support from Foucault’s assertion that order and identity are created and maintained through discourses of deviance. Building on this formulation, William Connolly argues in a thoughtful and influential study of identity that it requires ‘the conversion of some differences into otherness, into evil, or one of its numerous surrogates’. Identity for Connolly is ‘a slippery, insecure experience, dependent on its ability to define difference and vulnerable to the tendency of entities it would so define to counter, resist, overturn, or subvert definitions applied to them’. Power is therefore essential to maintain, even impose, identity and gives rise to hierarchies whose primary function is to safeguard and propagate sanctioned discourses of identity, while suppressing or marginalizing those who question these secular truths. Connolly extends the parallel between identity and religion in his contention that concepts of good and evil are central to both, and find expression in the demonization and exclusion, rather than toleration and dialogue, of those who dissent. He sees this response as a ‘temptation’ for human beings, not something they are hard-wired to do, and remains hopeful that we will one day become capable of feeling secure in our identities without demonizing others.

Not all philosophers and international relations scholars have accepted the need for stereotyped ‘others’, although there is widespread agreement that every identity and culture is surrounded, even penetrated, by constitutive others. Johann Herder thought that each individual and culture had a unique way of being human, and that we in turn become more human by understanding and appreciating this variety. Drawing on Herder, Friedrich Nietzsche offered the general proposition that the good human life is fundamentally dialogical in character. Such dialogue rests on the premise that interlocutors embrace opposing metaphysical truths but affirm the contestable and uncertain nature of these truths. ‘Noble’ adversaries learn to practise ‘forbearance’ and ‘thoughtfulness’ in their relations with others. Nietzsche’s understanding of dialogue in turn influenced Jürgen Habermas, for whom ethics and truth can only arise through meaningful interactions.
with others based on the principle and practice of equality.\textsuperscript{19} John Rawls also argues that justice can only arise from dialogue and compromise among interlocutors. While his \textit{Theory of Justice} is a monological thought experiment, he nevertheless contends that liberalism can only work in practice as a dialogue among people with opposing points of view and metaphysical commitments. The influence of Habermas and Rawls is such that finding the conditions for open and meaningful dialogue has become a central project of contemporary moral philosophy.

Despite their numerous differences, the principal focus of Kant, Hegel and Schmitt is on the construction of one’s own national identity. Historians and psychologists have also investigated the consequences of identity construction for ‘others’ and have documented or demonstrated the negative consequences of exclusion and stereotypy for their development and self-esteem.\textsuperscript{20} Neither Kant nor Hegel were unidimensional thinkers, and they framed identity not only as the construction of difference, but as an encounter with a pre-existing difference. Underneath cultural and other differences lay a common humanity, which might allow the dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘other’ to be overcome through a process of mutual recognition by individuals and their collectivities. Such a reading of Kant and Hegel, and of Herder as well, surfaces in Mead and Pizzorno, and helped to inspire the projects of Gadamer and Levinas.

Some late twentieth-century philosophers – who also draw on Hegel – adopt this perspective, and stress the needs of ‘others’ for recognition and inclusion. According to Charles Taylor, identity:

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is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

Axel Honneth makes a parallel case in the domain of international relations for non- and mis-recognition as a basis of social and interpersonal conflict.\textsuperscript{22} Drawing on Aristotle’s notion of friendship and Heidegger’s notion of anxiety, Felix Berenskoetter contends that the friend as the ‘significant other’ is capable, even at the international level, of reducing anxiety and creating the framework for moral authenticity and recognition.\textsuperscript{23}

In recent years, right and left have intersected in what many consider an alarming way.\textsuperscript{24} Since the near collapse of communist regimes, or their evolution into something else, Marxist writings are no longer a credible vehicle to \textit{épater le bourgeoisie}. Toward this end, some radical critics of liberalism have turned to the arguments of radical anti-Semitism, Nazi theoretician and active collaborator Carl Schmitt to criticize liberal conceptions of identity. Chantal Mouffe deploys his understanding of the political to expose what she considers the arbitrary exclusions and violence in the liberal philosophy of John Rawls. She maintains that society inevitably entails:

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a fundamental antagonism in every associational form, a division internal to the construction of every social identity that enables it to function while simultaneously defeating its ability to realize itself as a rational, cooperative, unified or non-antagonistic whole.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

For modern thinkers, the question of identity has been framed with the background understanding that there are no demonstrable metaphysical truths. William Connolly
notes that Nietzsche and Schmitt – who provide opposing foundational texts in the debate about the ‘other’ – respond in diametrically opposed ways to this philosophical reality. Nietzsche attempts to transcend it through dialogue that builds understanding and community among those who adhere to competing truths and cultural orientations. Schmitt turns to the state for certainty and the artificial unity it can enforce through an exclusionary ideology and policies. If Nietzsche identifies the beautiful with individual freedom and creativity, Schmitt sees it in homogeneity, unity and strength.26

These opposing orientations and projects cannot be overcome by Nietzschean dialogue or Schmittian repression. They rest on different philosophical foundations and empirical assumptions, and the latter can be evaluated by social science. In the next section I will review some of the key findings of psychology in this regard, and show how the consensus in the field has evolved away from the view that ingroup solidarity inevitably necessitated the creation of stereotyped outgroups and toward acceptance of the idea that ingroup and outgroup creation are the products of separate dynamics. I then turn to the Iliad to show that many of the insights of modern psychology are implicit in its narrative.

Ingroups and outgroups

Even in psychology, Marilynn Brewer laments, it was long conventional wisdom that ingroup solidarity and outgroup hostility were flip sides of the same coin.27 This belief dates back to the early twentieth century and William Graham Sumner’s foundational treatment of ethnocentrism and stereotypy. Adopting a structural-functional perspective, he reasoned that pride, loyalty and feelings of ingroup superiority were positively correlated with contempt, hatred and hostility toward outgroups. Group formation was a functional response to the struggle for scarce resources and gave rise to hostility, even violence, toward competing groups.28

More recent research on ‘entiativity’ finds the need to construct an ‘other’ to be endemic at the group level. Henri Tajfel and his co-researchers theorize that social identities buffer anxiety and build self-esteem by allowing individuals to bask in the reflected glory of a group’s achievements. Ingroup identification leads to a bias in favour of those who are part of the ingroup and prejudice against those who are not. There is compelling evidence that people will allocate resources across groups in response to this bias even when it is disadvantageous to themselves.29

Social identity theory suggests that people join and maintain groups for varied and often reinforcing reasons.30 The evidence for self-esteem as a motive nevertheless remains strong. Research indicates that members of low-status groups usually adopt one of two strategies: collective action intended to improve the standing of their group, or defection to a group with a higher standing.31 Studies using sports teams as their focus find that people are more likely to identify with highly ranked teams and disassociate themselves from teams that decline in the rankings.32 Cross-cultural research also reveals that people prefer to identify with high-status groups, although patterns of group identification (social versus political) vary across countries.33 Group and contextual variables complicate the relationship between self-esteem and group identification, making the choice of identity maintenance strategies extremely sensitive to context.34 There is growing evidence that similar kinds of preferences are exhibited by state actors.35
Gordon Allport’s pioneering study of prejudice, published in 1954, was the first important work to suggest that ingroup attachment does not require outgroup hostility.\textsuperscript{36} Allport reasoned that ingroups are ‘psychologically primary’ and develop before any conceptions of outgroups. Ingroup solidarity, moreover, is compatible with positive and negative affect toward outgroups. Allport also discovered that the boundaries between in- and outgroups were flexible; ingroup identification becomes more or less inclusive depending on the circumstances. Subsequent laboratory and cross-cultural surveys lend weight to the proposition that ingroup identification is independent of negative affect toward outgroups.\textsuperscript{37} Surveys in particular indicate that patriotism and national pride – both manifestations of ingroup solidarity – are conceptually distinct from stereotypes of outgroups and aggression toward them.\textsuperscript{38} ‘Oppositional consciousness’, to use Jane Mansbridge’s term for identity based on hostility toward outgroups, may be far less common in practice than generally supposed.\textsuperscript{39}

Summarizing recent research, Brewer finds complicated and still poorly understood patterns among ingroup solidarity, hostility and discrimination.\textsuperscript{40} Ingroup bias and outgroup hostility is more closely associated with preferential treatment of ingroup members than it is with discrimination or violence against outgroups.\textsuperscript{41} Even in the absence of strong negative stereotypes, studies of ethnic and racial prejudice in the United States and Western Europe indicate the widespread existence of ‘subtle racism’, defined as the absence of positive feelings toward minority groups. Subtle racism reinforces the propensity of ingroups to reward their members over those of outgroups.\textsuperscript{42} Discrimination in turn does not require ingroup loyalty or attachment, or even negative stereotypes of outgroups. Survey and comparative political research indicates that this is most pronounced in conditions where groups compete for physical resources or political power.\textsuperscript{43}

Sherif and Sherif theorized that loyalties to large collectives like nations, even humankind, were compatible with those to family, religion and region.\textsuperscript{44} They reasoned that ‘transcendent’ identities might actually mute feelings of hostility because they provide some base for common identity and empathy between in- and outgroups.\textsuperscript{45} The European project appears to have had this effect in some long-standing national and ethnic conflicts. However, greater interdependence with outgroups can sometimes promote intergroup conflict and hostility. As ingroups become larger and more impersonal, the institutions, rules and customs that maintain ingroup loyalty and cooperation tend to assume the character of moral authority. Outgroups who do not adhere to the same rules and customs are no longer viewed indifferently, but with contempt and hostility.\textsuperscript{46} More inclusive groups, whether sub- or supranational, also threaten the loss of distinctiveness for individuals with strong ingroup identification. In this connection, it is important to note that groups strive for distinctiveness that is considered positive by their members.\textsuperscript{47} When outgroups feel distinctive on dimensions that matter to them, and thus superior to an ingroup, they can tolerate, even acknowledge, ingroup superiority in other domains.\textsuperscript{48} When they hold common standards for worth, the mutual search for positive distinctiveness, and the higher status associated with it, becomes more competitive.\textsuperscript{49} Any of these processes can be intensified or dampened by leaders seeking to exploit or downplay hostile feelings for their own political ends.

In conclusion, there is ample historical evidence that identity construction has often been accompanied by the creation of stereotyped ‘others’. However, there is little empirical or laboratory evidence to support the claim that identity or national solidarity requires ‘others’, let alone their violent exclusion from domestic, regional or international communities.
The Iliad

Institutional and collective memory are the principal vehicles of group identity and solidarity. They are sites of contestation, as political authorities, intellectuals and institutions of all kinds attempt to foster memories conducive to their political projects or psychological needs. There is not only conflict about the contents of institutional and collective memories, but also between these forms of memory when they represent different and clashing understandings.50 Intellectuals play critical roles in both kinds of conflict. They create oral and written discourses and counter-discourses that have the potential of shaping collective and institutional memory, although the latter requires the support of those in power. The text I am about to examine offers the quintessential example of this process, and thus has important implications for how we think about identity construction and maintenance.

We know nothing about Homer’s intentions – assuming he even existed – or about the bards who shaped or reshaped his poem until it finally assumed written form. Collectively, they established a discourse that taught Greeks who they were. In classical times the sign of an educated man was his ability to recite sections of the Iliad and the Odyssey, and there were people who knew both epics by heart.51 Greeks assimilated Homeric values to such a degree, according to Socrates, that there were Greeks who thought they should mould their lives around the characters and values of the epics.52 Homer’s poetry shaped not only the collective memory of generations of Greeks, but institutional memory, as the Iliad and the Odyssey became central features of the school curricula of poleis stretching from Spain to the Black Sea. Knowledge of Greek language and culture, propagated through these enduring works of literature, helped to create a strong sense of Hellenic community that transcended, but did not supersede, commitments to individual city-states.

The Iliad is a fictional work that describes a fictional world. Homer, if he actually existed, lived some time in the ninth or eighth century BCE, some three or four hundred years after the Trojan War is supposed to have occurred. It is possible that the Iliad portrays a real war on the basis of stories passed down by word of mouth through the Greek Dark Ages. At some stage, bards combined these stories into a larger narrative – the Iliad is 15,000 lines – and improvised many lines in retelling them according to a sophisticated set of rules.53 Improvisation inevitably, perhaps purposefully, introduced some of contemporary society’s values, ideals and practices. The bards constructed what Max Weber would call an ideal type: a mental construct that will never be encountered in practice but nevertheless offers insights into real worlds.54

According to Greek myth, the Trojan War is the direct result of Paris’s elopement with Helen, the wife of King Menelaus of Sparta. This was a violation of Menelaus’ honour and of guest friendship (xenia), a convention common to most traditional societies.55 In Greece, the obligation to receive guests was considered so important that hospitality was made one of the epithets of the father of the gods: Zeus Xenios.56 In return, the guest must not abuse his host’s hospitality or overstay his welcome. Menelaus defends his honour by attempting to punish Paris and regain Helen. He is also defending his position, as he would be regarded as weak by rivals and neighbours if he failed to act. He asks Zeus to grant him revenge ‘so that any man born hereafter may shrink from wronging a host who has shown him friendship’.57 Honour requires Greeks connected to Menelaus by ties of obligation, family or guest friendship to come to his aid.58 On the Trojan side, guest friendship moves King Priam to offer refuge to his son Paris and the woman he has run off with, even though he and most Trojans thoroughly disapprove of the pair and recognize that their presence is certain to provoke a war with the Greeks.
The principal focus of the *Iliad* is the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon, which is also driven by honour. In an act of moral blindness (*atē*), the greedy Agamemnon takes a slave girl from Achilles to replace the one he must return to her father. Achilles is furious, withdraws from the struggle, refuses gifts subsequently offered him by Agamemnon, and only returns to the fighting to avenge the death of his beloved Patroclus. Homer ends his tale while the war is still raging, but his listeners know that Troy will be captured and its inhabitants slaughtered or enslaved, but not before Achilles, Hector and many other Greek and Trojan heroes die. Menelaus will return home with Helen, but his brother Agamemnon will be murdered by his unfaithful wife Clytemnestra, who has never forgiven him his sacrifice of their daughter.

The Trojans give the superficial appearance of being the principal ‘other’ for the Greeks. The war against them, already in its tenth year, has rallied Greeks from all over Hellas and helped to build a common Greek identity – just as reading Homer’s description of the war would do for later generations of Greeks who considered themselves their linear descendants. Greek warriors are filled with ‘hate’ (*misei*) for their Trojan adversaries, and Achilles in particular, rages against them – but only after Patroclus is killed by Hector. It is not enough for him to kill Hector in turn, he must disfigure his body, drag him back to camp on his chariot and slaughter 12 young Trojan boys before Patroclus’ funeral pyre.59

Close listeners or readers of the poem understand hate to be an artefact of a war that has taken Greeks far away from their homes, and exposed them to the rigours of camp life and to mounting losses of family and friends through illness and enemy action. Their leader Agamemnon is greedy and authoritarian and his behaviour makes a mockery of the values that led the Greeks to follow him to Troy. Achilles is absolutely explicit about the focus of his hatred: ‘The Trojans never did *me* damage, not in the least, they never stole my cattle or my horses, never in Phthia where the rich soils breeds strong men did they lay waste my crops.’ Furious at Agamemnon for taking his slave girl Briseis for himself, he exclaims: ‘No you colossal, shameless – we all followed you, to please you, to fight for you, to win your honour back from the Trojans – Menelaus and you, you dog-face!’60

After this incident Achilles and his Myrmidons withdraw from the fighting. Achilles has the standing to do this. Other warriors cannot just sulk in their tents or pack up and go home without being denounced as cowards and deserters. Nor can they complain openly like Thersites, the only common soldier with a voice in the poem, and he was beaten into a pulp by Odysseus for speaking out.61 Aristocratic warriors must repress and redirect outwards against the Trojans their pain, suffering, anxiety, anger and fear. Given this situation, what is truly remarkable about the *Iliad* is its portrayal of Greeks and Trojans as fundamentally similar and equally worthy peoples, a characterization that reveals Greek hate as the psychological defence it is, and gives additional poignancy to the war and its unrelieved slaughter. Listeners and readers grieve equally for the death of heroes on both sides, an emotional response that generates strong dissonance with the initial binary the poem appears to set up.

This dissonance is enhanced in the portrayal of individual Trojans, Greek–Trojan behaviour on and off the battlefield, the many parallels and few differences the poem draws between the two sides, and divine intervention, which suggests that Greeks and Trojans alike are the playthings of gods motivated by ego, passion and jealousy. The dissonance is partially resolved in the penultimate scene, one of the most moving in Western literature, in which emotion and reason come together to create a precarious reconciliation between Priam and Achilles. Homer is telling us that Greeks become Greeks through their
engagement with Trojans, and that their most distinguished warrior can only regain his humanity through the combined efforts of the gods and the Trojan king. The self does not form so much in opposition to the ‘other’, but more in conjunction with it. In doing so, the self is not only constructed but stretched. One’s identity is defined not just in terms of the family (oikos) and ethnic group (Greek) but as part of humanity as a whole. This stretching provides the ethical foundations of identity that make it and human existence ultimately worthwhile.

Let us begin with Homer’s depiction of the Trojans. They are the Greeks’ enemy, to be sure, but are never portrayed in stereotypical terms by either the poet or Greek warriors. Hector is a warrior and a civilized man. He returns from battle and picks up his son, who recoils in terror because he does not recognize his father, and sees only a man in a fierce war helmet with a great plume on top. Hector takes off his helmet, laughs, lifts his son up into the air and asks the gods to grant him glory. Andromache, his wife, takes the child from him, presses it to her breast and smiles through her tears. We know that the young Astyanax will be thrown from the walls by victorious Greeks – the very negation of civilized behaviour.

Trojan heroes and their allies emerge as men of outstanding character and quality, as do their women. King Priam and his son Hector are arguably the most admirable figures in the epic. They are deeply committed to their families and city, but also to the behavioural code, shared by Greeks and Trojans, that brings them time, a word used by Homer and later Greeks to signify honour and office. Their unflinching adherence to this code brings war to the city when Priam extends guest friendship to Helen, and death to Hector when he refuses the wise advice to retreat inside the wall of Troy and instead allows Achilles to engage him in single combat. He tells Andromache, ‘I would die of shame to face the men of Troy and the Trojan women trailing their long robes if I would shrink from the battle now, a coward.’ A recent survey of West Point cadets reveals that Achilles – the most skilled but least disciplined of warriors – is no longer the most admired figure in the epic. Students offer a victorious Hector as their role model, explaining that he is acting in defence of his family and city. There are striking contrasts between Priam and Agamemnon, whose greed dishonours his office, and Hector and Achilles, who becomes a raging lion without human feelings after Patroclus is killed.

Even more revealing are the contrasts between Greek and Trojan women. Helen, the only Greek woman in the epic, is a self-hating woman of low character, who laments the day she was born but makes every accommodation necessary to stay alive. Priam’s queen Hecuba and Hector’s wife Andromache, like Penelope in the Odyssey, live up to the Greek ideals of womanhood. They are loyal to their husbands, offer them emotional support and sound advice, and perform valuable services on the ‘home front’. They behave with exceptional restraint and correctness toward Helen, whose presence has caused the war that is likely to kill their husbands and make them widows and slaves.

Helen divides Greeks from Trojans but also unites them. She was married to Agamemnon and is now betrothed to Paris. Standing on the ramparts of Troy she identifies and describes the various Greek warriors and praises their skills and hospitality. Helen is aware of how she brings the two sides together, not only in the action of the poem, but in the ‘dark, folding robe’ she weaves, ‘working into the weft the endless bloody struggles stallion-breaking Trojans and Argives armed in bronze had suffered all for her at the god of battle’s demands’.

The text stresses the many similarities between Greeks and Trojans. Book 2, a catalogue of armies, describes the Greek forces and then the Trojans and their allies. Many fewer
lines are devoted to the Trojans but the same positive adjectives are used to describe their leading fighters. Book 3 indicates that Greeks and Trojans worship the same gods and share common values. In Book 4, both sides make sacrifices before the first detailed description of battle and mourn in its aftermath. Their warriors display equal bravery and success, with Greeks and Trojans alternating kills. Both sides act in accord with the rules of war, generally giving quarter to disarmed men and showing civility, even kindness, to their opponents. Homer drives home their fundamental sameness in his description of the battleground once the fighters have withdrawn: ‘That day ranks of Trojans, ranks of Achaean fighters sprawled there side-by-side, facedown in the dust.’ In Book 7, the two sides agree to a truce so they can recover the bodies of the fallen. It is hard to tell who belongs to which side until the bodies are washed and prepared for immolation.

Book 3 foregrounds the two men directly responsible for the war: Paris and Menelaus. Paris is the least admirable man in the epic. He absconded with Menelaus’ wife and is a coward to boot, content to let his brothers bear the brunt of the fighting while he dallies with Helen safely within the confines of the palace. Menelaus is forthright if tedious, and committed to getting Helen back and destroying Troy for the succour it has given to Paris and Helen. Upbraided by Hector, Paris agrees to fight Menelaus in single combat, with the winner to receive Helen and all her possessions. Greeks and Trojans swear by Zeus to live in peace ever afterwards, a recognition that there is no fundamental issue dividing them other than Helen. Even Menelaus agrees to this arrangement, although he proclaims that ‘Such limited vengeance hurts me most of all – but I intend that we will part in peace, at last, Trojans and Achaean,.’ The two armies come together to sacrifice a white and black ewe to symbolize their agreement, and invoke the gods as guarantors of their promises to live in peace after the combat. The Greeks honour Priam by asking for him to seal the truce, as they do not trust his sons.

Menelaus is the worthier opponent and the better warrior. His spear penetrates Paris’s shield, but Paris deftly sidesteps its bronze point. Menelaus rushes forward and is on the verge of cleaving Paris’s skull when Aphrodite causes his sword to shatter on his opponent’s helmet. She then cuts Paris’s helmet strap and snatches him away to prevent Menelaus from dragging him back behind the Greek lines. Paris reappears in the palace, fired up by Aphrodite, and has an overwhelming need to make love to Helen. But even Helen turns on him, declaring that ‘It would be wrong, disgraceful to share that coward’s bed once more.’ She relents when Aphrodite threatens her: ‘I might make you the butt of hard, withering hate from both sides at once. Trojans and Achaean – then your fate can tread you down to dust.’ To make sure the fighting resumes, the gods intervene to break the truce. Athena ‘fires up the fool’s heart’ inside Pandarus, a Trojan archer who then shoots at and wounds Menelaus. Most of these encounters are closely observed by the gods on Olympus who take to their seats to watch the raging armies fight it out on the plain below.

A second great combat, between Ajax and Hector, also ends indecisively. It nevertheless reveals the awe with which Greeks regard Hector. Nobody wants to confront him until they are shamed and brought to their feet by wise old Nestor. Hector shows himself to be a fair warrior. He exclaims to Ajax: ‘On guard! Big and bluff as you are, I’ve no desire to hit you sniping on the sly – I’d strike you out in the open, strike you now!’ The gods keep Hector and Ajax from killing each other, and the two exhausted warriors finally agree to a personal truce. Hector tells Ajax: ‘Come, let us give each other gifts, unforgettable gifts, so any man may say, Trojan soldier or Argive, “First they fought with heart-devouring hatred, then they parted, bound by pacts of friendship.”’
The third and fourth great combats result in deaths. Hector bests Patroclus and Achilles kills Hector. The terms of engagement change, as does the language used by the warriors. Before striking him down, Hector tells Patroclus that ‘the vultures will eat your body raw’. His threat presages the inhuman treatment Achilles has in store for him. After killing Hector, Achilles pierces his ankles, runs rawhide straps through them to his chariot and drags his body back to the Greek camp where he leaves it exposed to the dogs. Learning of her son’s death, Hecuba in turn exclaims that she could eat Achilles ‘raw!’ For Greeks, one of the defining conditions of humanity was the preparation and cooking of meat, so both these references to rawness indicate at least a figurative return to an animal state. Achilles’ defilement of Hector’s body takes this descent another step, alienating himself from his identity, and threatening the honour of the Greek army. The gods intervene to preserve Hector’s body, express their disapproval to Achilles and sneak Priam into the Greek camp to ransom back his son. They exclaim that ‘Achilles has lost all pity! No shame in the man.’ Pity is another distinguishing feature of humans, and shame a sign of civilization.

Book 24 brings Achilles and Priam together in the culminating and climactic encounter between Greeks and Trojans. The encounter is fraught with danger; Priam must sneak through the Greek lines and camp with his cart, and trust in Achilles to receive him properly. Achilles must repress his anger, which threatens to break through and express itself in violence against Priam. Achilles and his retainers are restrained by the sight of Priam: ‘Achilles marveled, beholding majestic Priam. His men marveled too, trading startled glances.’ Seeing his moment, Priam pours out his heart to Achilles:

Remember your own father, great godlike Achilles – as old as I am, past the threshold of deadly old age! No doubt the countrymen round him plague him now, with no one there to defend him, beat away disaster.

A few lines later, he attempts to transfer some of Achilles’ feelings about his father to himself: ‘Revere the gods, Achilles! Pity me in my own right, remember your own father!’ Achilles softens and Priam now suggests:

Let us put our griefs to rest in our own hearts, rake them up no more, raw as we are with mourning ... So the immortals spun our lives that we, wretched men live on to bear such torments – the gods live free of sorrows.

Priam, in effect, offers Achilles a chance to honour the gods and cheat them by returning his son and lessening his suffering. Achilles agrees to exchange Hector for the ransom and instructs his retainers to wash and wrap his body for its return journey to Troy. The two men share a meal, the symbolic end to mourning for Greeks. Before they part:

Priam the son of Dardanus gazed at Achilles, marveling now at the man’s beauty, his magnificent build – face-to-face he seemed a deathless god ... and Achilles gazed and marveled at Dardan Priam, beholding his noble looks, listen to his words.

The narrator suggests that together, but not individually, they have attained honour and wisdom through Achilles’ build and bravery and Priam’s noble looks and logos, in this instance meaning wisdom. Greeks and Trojans become who they are through their interaction, and they need each other to realize their human potential.
The encounter between Achilles and Priam does not end the war. Both men grieve for their loved ones, recognize the destructiveness, and even the irrationality, of their conflict, but lack a language they could use to construct new identities for themselves that would allow them to terminate the conflict and escape their preordained fates. Priam returns to Troy, knowing that it will be destroyed, and he and his family with it. Achilles knows that he must soon die and prepares for his final battle, proleptically brooding about his father mourning his death. The saga ends on a sombre note, but leaves listeners with the idea that they, unlike Achilles and Priam, can forge new identities and use the text as a vehicle toward this goal. This is precisely what happened in Greece. The Homeric texts – the *Odyssey* as well as the *Iliad* – take shape in repeated performances in which bards competing for honour repeatedly adapt the poems to local conditions and aspirations. The history of these epics reveals a gradual synthesis of diffuse traditions and dialects. This process stimulated and mediated the project of mutual self-definition by Greeks speaking many different dialects, and gave rise to an explicit pan-Hellenic identity and agenda.87

Learning from the Ancients

To the extent that the group of bards responsible for the *Iliad* had a political agenda, it was class-related. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are both composed for aristocrats. They vaunt their intelligence, leadership skills and willingness to sacrifice material comforts for honour, in sharp contrast to the plebian concerns, limited cognitive abilities and lack of steadfastness of ordinary people. In the *Iliad*, common folk (demos or hoi polloi) were set up as an ‘other’ that justified aristocratic privilege and helped to maintain class divisions in the West for the next 2500 years. For Homer, as for nineteenth-century European nobles, class cuts across and often trumps territorial, ethnic or religious divides. This may help to explain why the Trojans share so much in common with the Greeks – more than they do with their own common folk. Greek and Trojan aristocrats need each other to sustain and validate their common project: the quest for aristeia. Therites, as noted earlier, is put in his place by Odysseus, who hits him over the head with Agamemnon’s sceptre, a symbol of royal authority.88 Rule by aristocrats is portrayed as natural and divinely sanctioned.

The Trojans are nevertheless the principal ‘other’ in the *Iliad*, but they are represented in a nuanced way and as not very different from the Greeks. Their portrayal is constructed from the appearance, words and deeds of individual actors: Hector, Priam, Paris, Andromache and Aeneas are key in developing Homer’s image of the Trojans. They are certainly not essentialist in their characteristics, and neither are the Greeks. Greeks and Trojans reveal considerable variation in their character, courage, values and commitments. We can draw sharp contrasts in this regard between Achilles and Agamemnon and Hector and Paris.

Identity construction in the *Iliad* stands in sharp contrast to the understandings of Kant, Hegel and Schmitt. Trojans and Greeks are each other’s ‘other’, but they do not need this other to become themselves. Both groups had strong identities prior to their war, and there is no evidence that they achieve greater internal solidarity as a result of the conflict. If anything, the war exposes just how fragile the unity of the Greeks really is, and threatens, in the form of the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon, to destroy it altogether. Greek and Trojan mutual dependence serves a different function. It allows warrior aristocrats on both sides to compete for aristeia. This is only possible against an adversary who shares the same values and practices. The Trojan War is a hard-fought
struggle, motivated initially by Menelaus’ need to recover his wife and his honour. In practice, it becomes a competition for standing within the Greek and Trojan communities, where standing is a function of honourable and successful performance on the battlefield. Cooperation between adversaries – Priam’s successful ransom of his son’s body from Achilles – allows the chief Greek hero to regain his humanity when reason and affect convince him to put aside his overriding desire for vengeance.

Homer’s understanding of identity mirrors some of the findings of modern psychology. Identities form and become robust in the absence of others; hostility and discrimination arise from the competition for scarce resources – honour in this case – but not necessarily by stereotypy and exclusion. Competition for honour is a more restricted and relational good than material resources. It is intense and generates mutual hatred in the course of the war, but little stereotypy. Greeks and Trojans make attributions about the character of their adversaries on a purely individual basis and honour those whom they respect.

Both epics emphasize distinctiveness, but in relationship to honour. For Homer, Greeks and Trojans are distinctive because they conduct their affairs according to a demanding code of honour. They share this code and their warriors compete in displaying excellence, and do not seem troubled that their values and behaviour make them all but indistinguishable as peoples. As I noted earlier, their similarities are essential because they make it possible for their warriors to compete for honour. Honour could not be won the same way against less worthy and courageous foes who did not follow the same rules of combat. Honour may sound quaint to our modern ears, but there is considerable evidence that modern states and their leaders have been motivated as much by the quest for honour and standing as they have for security and material well-being.89

As Sherif and Sherif suppose, personal and family loyalties can be consistent with, and even supportive of, those to larger collectivities. They can also threaten them. In the Iliad, both armies are a composite of independent forces beholden to local leaders. These lords have come to the aid of Agamemnon and Menelaus or Priam because of family or guest friendship ties or personal obligations. The Greek alliance threatens to unravel because of Achilles’ feud with Agamemnon, but in the end it is solidified because of the death of Patroclus. Personal obligation in the form of revenge-seeking brings Achilles back into the fight.

Kant, Hegel and Schmitt have somewhat different views of what constitutes a nation, but they all consider hostility to others a key component of national identity formation and solidarity. Classical texts and research in psychology and comparative politics cast serious doubt on the validity of this assumption. We have many historical examples of the stereotypy and exclusion – even expulsion and murder – of others as a means of solidifying national identities, and these examples are often foregrounded in the literature on identity. Arguably, we have at least as many examples where identity formation and its consolidation was successful in its absence. Karl Deutsch describes the boundaries of national communities in terms of a ‘we feeling’ based on shared symbols and a narrative of a common past. He finds that these symbols and their associated narratives may be shaped around opposition and resistance to others, but it is by no means essential.90 Nor is it clear that many of the ‘others’ that are created are brought into being with identity in mind. The Soviet ‘other’ during the Cold War may have been necessary to garner support for a large defence budget and a quasi-imperial foreign policy, but was hardly essential, or even central, to American identity. The same is true of current ‘others’ like illegal immigrants or international Islam, both of which for Americans seem to have replaced the Soviet Union as the irrational and evil foreign other.91
Kant, Hegel and Schmitt use historical evidence selectively, and Hegel and Schmitt in particular only cite cases where national identity and conflicts with external others appear closely coupled. Their formulations have the potential to make adversarial ‘others’ self-fulfilling and thus appear natural. The analogy here is to the realist conception of international relations as a self-help system. Realists maintain that international relations must always have this character, and it will to the extent that policymakers are socialized to act in accordance with this assumption. The demonized ‘other’ and the naturally antagonistic character of the international system have the potential to create – and to some extent have created – a pernicious cycle of thought and deed. Both conceptions are mutually supporting, if not mutually constitutive. This relationship provides a strong normative incentive to rethink them both.

Kant, Hegel and Schmitt do not effectively distinguish between the use of ‘others’ to construct identities and build internal solidarity. The two projects are not identical. Common identity must to some degree involve a feeling of solidarity, but all three writers refer to a more intense form of solidarity, deliberately mobilized by governments to inspire people to sacrifice their money, time and even lives in wars against foreign adversaries. Hegel and Schmitt view war and sacrifice positively. Hegel does so because he regards the state as a critical historical development that enables the spirit to reach fulfilment. Hegel’s and Schmitt’s formulations arise out of the crucible of European nationalism, for which, in different ways, they are advocates and spokesmen. Recent work on Kant and Hegel suggests that their ‘othering’ was part and parcel of the response by intellectuals from relatively backward parts of Europe to the challenge posed by the French Revolution. Robbie Shilliam suggests that Kant and Hegel actually pursued a variant of the strategy I associate with Vergil: they sought to construct a German ‘self’ by incorporating important elements of the French ‘other’. Unlike Vergil, who is quite open about this aspect of his project, Kant and Hegel incorporate the other more furtively, as it confounds their otherwise sharp dichotomy between a community and the ‘others’ against which it defines itself.

There are also good grounds for questioning the political utility of constructing identities or fostering greater solidarity by means of violent conflicts against stereotyped others. Hegel’s Prussia–Germany offers the most compelling negative example. Nationalism was a root cause of the aggressive foreign policy of the Wilhelmine Reich, which led to World War I, defeat, territorial dismemberment, revanchist sentiment, the rise to power of Hitler, World War II, the Holocaust, further loss of territory and almost 50 years of division. The twentieth-century tragedies of Japan, Italy, the former Yugoslavia, Cyprus, and the Indian subcontinent also arose from hyper-nationalism, fanned by leaders, that led to destructive internal or foreign wars.

Hegel’s, Schmitt’s and above all Huntington’s, formulations of identity would lead us to expect that the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘others’ are relatively inflexible once they are established. As identity is defined in opposition to others, and solidarity depends on distinction and even hatred of others, both would be threatened by the inclusion of peoples who were formerly excluded. It is remarkable just how fluid categories of ‘others’ turn out to be in practice. With regularity, ‘others’ who were not only excluded and demonized, but objects of violent ethnic cleansing, have subsequently been incorporated into the community with no loss of national identity or solidarity. English Catholics and Irish immigrants in Britain, Jews in Germany, Irish Catholics, southern Europeans, Jews, native Americans, Japanese Americans and African Americans in the United States. As racism generally has an impoverished rhetoric, it is hardly surprising that the very charges that Huntington
makes against Latin immigrants – that they are unassimilatable – were routinely made against Italians, Slavs and Jews in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Once excluded groups can be made pillars of national identity, as the Maoris have been in New Zealand. Maori designs grace the tails of Air New Zealand planes, New Zealand sports teams and delegations of all kinds chant hakas (Maori war chants) at the beginning of matches or meetings, and school children are taught about their Maori heritage. More subdued moves have been made in the US with respect to native Americans and African Americans. Conversely, groups once considered at the core of a community’s identity, as Britain was for colonial Americans, Australians and New Zealanders, have been expelled and to varying degrees stereotyped. In New Zealand one not infrequently hears the British referred to disparagingly as ‘pommy bastards’ – a reference to the pom-pom on their military beret.

The New Zealand case points to another interesting parallel with Homer: the possibility of excluding a group or nationality without demonizing them or treating their representatives with hostility. New Zealanders have made the British into an ‘other’ as part of the process of defining a separate identity. Citizens of the United Kingdom are nevertheless welcomed in New Zealand and treated with the same degree of courtesy as any other visitor or immigrant. In Canada, a similar process can be observed with respect to Québécois and Anglo-Canadians. The rhetoric of French separatism can be intense, but it rarely affects interpersonal relations. Having spent a sabbatical year in Montreal I can attest that I was treated exactly the same way in shops, cafes and social and professional encounters regardless of the language I spoke. These cases, and others suggest, as does psychological research, that even when ‘othering’ is pronounced it need not be associated with the kind of stereotyping and hostility that poisons interpersonal relations.

The psychological and political science literature indicates that fundamentalist formulations of ‘others’ are more ideology than they are a description of reality. They are used rhetorically to advance political projects, which in the case of Schmitt and Huntington can only be considered nefarious. At the same time, the formulations of Habermas and Rawls must be considered unrealistic. Homer, Vergil and Joyce offer different understandings of identity that are associated with their very different projects. Their conceptions are particularly germane to those, like John Herz and scholars in his tradition, who want to make inclusion and tolerance the norm. Homer in particular offers a discourse that finds much empirical support in contemporary psychological research, and whose starting point is the understanding that national identity and solidarity are fully consistent with, and even sustained by, policies of inclusion and non-stereotyped understandings of ‘others’.

Notes


12 Huntington, Clash of Civilizations, pp. 21, 129.


15 Connolly, Identity/Difference, esp. pp. 4–9, 64–81, 124.


44 Sherif and Sherif, *Groups in Harmony and Tension*, p. 44.


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51 Xenophon, Symposium, 3.5.


55 Kant, ‘Perpetual Peace’, pp. 105–8, thought that xenia was probably the one universal form of conduct.


59 Homer, Iliad, 23.199–201.

60 Homer, Iliad, 1.180–92.

61 Homer, Iliad, 2.246–324.

62 Homer, Iliad, 6.556–600.

63 Homer, Iliad, 6.523–5.

64 Personal communication from Christopher Coker, 23 June 2007.


66 Homer, Iliad, 3.150–4.


68 Homer, Iliad, 4.629–30.

69 Homer, Iliad, 7.487–99.

70 Homer, Iliad, 3.119–21.

71 Homer, Iliad, 3.125–35.

72 Homer, Iliad, 3.98–42.

73 Homer, Iliad, 3.484–6.

74 Homer, Iliad, 4.59–146.


76 Homer, Iliad, 7.183–201.

77 Homer, Iliad, 7.282–5.

78 Homer, Iliad, 7.346–50.

79 Homer, Iliad, 16.976.

80 Homer, Iliad, 24.252.

81 Homer, Iliad, 24.252.

82 Homer, Iliad, 24.567–8.

83 Homer, Iliad, 24.567–73.

84 Homer, Iliad, 24.588–9.


86 Homer, Iliad, 24. 740–5.


88 Homer, Iliad, 2.246–324.

89 Richard Ned Lebow, A Cultural Theory of International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), for an elaboration of this claim.

