

## Hill, Richard, *A Question of Identity: Getting the Better of Globalization*

2011. Electronically published by Europublications, Division of Europublic sca/cva, Avenue Louise 437/2, B-1050 Brussels. Tel: + 32 2 343 77 26, Fax: + 32 2 343 93 30. [www.europublications.com](http://www.europublications.com)

*Reviewed by Dr. George F. Simons at [diversophy.com](http://diversophy.com)*

Who are you? Who am I? Is my identity my psychological treasure or my political liability? Does my passport connect me to those like me or is it a subtle form of identity theft? Do I or we need identity for ourselves or for others? What are identity's facets and consequences? Is identity more important or less important in the age of Facebook than it was before baptismal registers and phone books? Are our so-called "cultures" as real as we think they are? For example, are Greeks and Turks separated by native genius or genetics, by history or hystorionics?

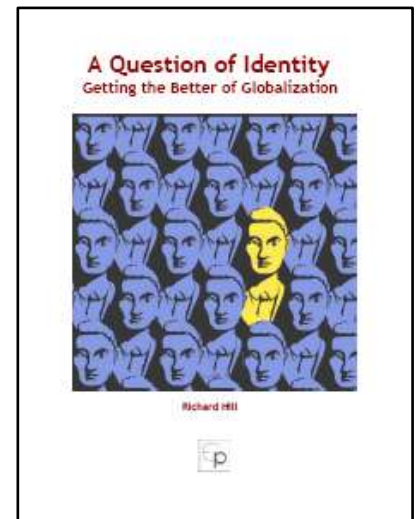
Richard Hill has written an extremely readable treatise on the nature and role of Identity (if such exists) in our lives, particularly in the so-called globalized world we inhabit. The book takes you by the hand and leads you through the common perspectives we take on our identity

and its formation and feeds your suspicions that perhaps not all is well with what we have come to take for granted around the topic of who's who. *A Question of Identity* is rich in perspectives, insightful citations, examples as well as historical and hysterical plunges into murky waters. Those who know Hill's writing will expect his Brit-wit, the spot-on irreverent phrase, as well as his incisive irony. They will not be disappointed.

Having posed the issue – framing questions of identity in the introduction and first chapter, "Who do we think we are?" Hill moves on in Chapter 2 to discuss the connection of land and place in identity formation and the key issue here is one of possession. Make no mistake about it; this is first and foremost a book about Europe, despite its references to non-European connections and experiences. The future of Europe in the European Union is what is at stake here, and how Europeans identify themselves, as Europeans, as members of the individual European nation states, or by their regional attachments, will very much determine the shape and future story of the European Union.

Chapter Three puts the lie to assumptions of national identity by taking a good look at the populations, largely of Europe, and the general inability to find much homogeneity on the level of origins, genetics and stability. Common assumptions about others are also examined to show little or no factual reliability in what people think of those assumed to be different in their midst. Difference tends to mean uncertainty and fear about neighbors who have been there even as long as we have. "To sanctify your culture, you have to demonise someone else's." The fact is that national culture inevitably has to be manufactured and sustained if it is to exist. Hill cites the Normans and Prussians as reinvented cultures. How is this done, is the question to be pursued.

Chapter Four, "Carve-up, cook-up, cock-up," provides some answers. "Carve up" relates to the politically negotiated borders and states usually by the winners in the aftermath of war and conquest sitting around the map and negotiated where lines should be drawn. Historical landmarks are cited in the shaping of nation states in Europe with some references to European Colonialism in Africa. I find it



very satisfying that the author uses historical vignettes to explore the origins of cultural shaping. Too frequently, discussions of culture wander about without much solid footing on the path of history.

Chapter Five brings up the ever thorny issue of the Balkans, best summed up by Hill in a single phrase as “a fiery blend of culture, religion and real estate.”

Chapter Six discusses identity formation and attitudes about identity in four European countries—the chapter title tells it all: “Sentimental Brits, delusional Frenchmen, vainglorious Greeks. Frank assessment of his countrymen’s illusions of identity, and astute observations of others’. Here as elsewhere in the book, I am reminded that though many of us are moving in the direction of understanding the socially constructed nature of what we have been calling culture, these constructions are the context in which we live, breathe, and carry on our daily life. What we identify as cultural particularities and peculiarities are not going to disappear anytime soon. Despite the mix of the hybridization and mobility that characterize the current cultural scene, the French will be French, and the Germans will be German in strong strains of thinking and behavior, etc. Hence the consideration of stereotypes in the very next chapter. There will also be more about this later on when the author addresses generational differences and issues in Chapter Ten.

Chapter Seven addresses Stereotypes. It is a brief chapter but quite effectively makes sense out of the phenomenon in a European context. While for many interculturalists, stereotypes and stereotyping are dealt with as the hallmark of ignorance and prejudice, Hill sees most of them as rather innocuous and common to Europeans’ sense of humor. They signal recognition of obvious differences and are tribute to the fact that Europeans largely, “have not been infected with the scourge of political correctness, where reality no longer exists because you can’t talk about it.” Some stereotypes can be offensive, but on the other hand, “they sometimes throw light on their victims and tell you something that it would take a lifetime to find out on your own.” In short they may be distilled folk wisdom. They come from observation that may lead to both insight and entertainment, despite their propensity to be half-truths. On the other hand they can be deliberately used for misinformation. Handle with care, but handle nonetheless.

The eighth Chapter takes a look at religion, “The Sublime,” and at the decline in European religiosity. Here we are face-to-face with how religious identity has contributed both horror and help to people as they confront their differences. Religious and national or ethnic identity all too often become dangerously fused, providing opportunities for exercising political power and leading to violence in the name of identity. Religion has been the delimiter of the major political and cultural fault lines in European geography, both east-west and north-south, Western Christianity vs. Orthodox faith, Catholic vs. Protestant. Religious identity is a renewable resource for prejudice and violence despite its relative state of decay in Europe. Europeans find, for example, that US religious identity and its politics to be incomprehensible madness.

So much for Christians among themselves. Then there is the question of Islam for which Hill gives a rather succinct history in its relationship to Europe from the blessings of multicultural Arab Spain to the Crusaders’ violent incursions and massacres. Protracted hegemonic policies toward the Middle East and Maghreb, and continued Western incursions. Today terrorism in the name of faith is an unfortunate expression of a desire for meaning and identity. Hill identifies super “isms” such as Communism, National Socialism, etc. with religions, given the structure of their belief systems and dynamics.

Chapter Nine. Surprise! "Gorblimey!" It gets tangible in a fresh way. What are the tokens, symbols, etc. used as indicators of identity? There is the apparatus of patriotism, flags, medals, seals and symbols, uniforms, and, today, tee shirts, bumper stickers, etc., as well as the preferred consumption of one's own national products. The same for fashions and fads of dress and body adornment. Even when it comes to the veiling of Muslim women, one cannot assume the intentions of the veiled. Sport provides some with another strong avenue of acting out identity and can provide an avenue not only of loud expression but pent up violence.

Chapter 10: "Grand old men and the young." Here there is an extensive comparison of older and younger generations. It is an interesting, but not a conclusive read, in the sense that neither the author nor we can understand the full structure of what is going on in identification with virtual realities and communities. It is too soon.

"Nuclear Family or Nation State?" is the title of Chapter 11. With this and the following chapter, we are really immersed in the perceptions and vision of European people, their states and the future structure of the European Union. Given that identity will continue to be postulated on the level of nation, region, locality and family, the question is what will be prominent in identity and size determination, not only on an emotional, psychological level, but in the practical management of a state composed of political and social subdivisions. Hill sizes up the assets and liabilities of the current European situation.

What does our human herd instinct and such concepts as national sovereignty as well as how we choose our heroes have to do with how we identify ourselves and express our patriotism? How long has the nation state been around and how long will it remain? The answers are, "Not very long," and, "Probably a good while yet," although there is shape shifting going on. One of the most disturbing elements in this discussion is the progress of genetic science which is strongly testifying to the bastard and mestizo nature of just about every one of us. So much for racial purity and ethnic authenticity! At the moment, we seem to be left to fend for ourselves in the traffic. In tracing the paths of our identities there are plenty of detours from the social construction sites blocking the way.

"So where do we go from here?" That is the reader's question and the one that Hill chooses to reflect on to close the book. Europe faces dilemmas of bigger vs. smaller, looser vs. tighter, etc., and no amount of polls and plebiscites will soon resolve any of this. Public attitudes occur in real time and the financial crisis is the loudest discourse dominating feelings and attitudes about this at the moment. There is in the background some preference for a Europe of regions rather than of states yet also the danger of a kind of linguistic and social ghettoization as a result. While the increasing numbers of third culture kids and internal hybridization will probably add an element of flexibility to the identity scene. In any case, the future will be messy, as perhaps, on reflection, it should be.