

Book Review – *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity* (2018); Anthony K. Appiah

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Identity as a social construct is one of the oldest and most important social artifacts in the history of human civilizations. According to scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah, identity paradigms constitute social constructions based on features such as gender, race, religion, or class, amongst other distinctive indicators.¹ In this sense, identities are organizational tools that humans may rely on to categorize themselves in alignment with or in contrast to one another. More importantly, identities provide humans with historical and socio-political anchors, which are crucial in the formulation and realization of a deep and necessary sense of belonging. Simultaneously, identities can also be destructive forces lest they become weaponized, a fact symbolized by a myriad of observable identity-related conflicts today such as the Rohingya and Nagorno-Karabakh crises, or Hindu-Muslim clashes accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, amongst others. In a world of many competing identities and claims, *how can humans manage such complex, at times ferocious, forces to avoid conflict yet achieve their personal and group objectives?*

Amidst a wave of global socio-political challenges such as the rapid proliferation of populism in America and Europe, consultation with the appropriate scholarship on identity and social ethics is crucial to answering this book review's question. As such, this book review will provide a synopsis and an evaluation of Appiah's latest addition to the field – *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity* – an account of the author's most essential arguments over identity constructs, their inner workings, and his endorsements on how to manage them. Meant to serve as a relevant reference point to all humans as they tackle these social forces' internal and external challenges, this book's contribution to the broader ethics and identity scholarship will be evaluated.

¹ Anthony Appiah, *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity* (Newyork: Liveright Publishing Corp., 2018), Kindle.

Born and raised in an English-Ghanaian household,² Professor Appiah has enjoyed an intriguingly diverse upbringing. His personal experience best embodies a global citizen's, reflected by his diverse living experience in Africa, Europe, and now North America.³ With a relatively well-rounded personal and academic understanding of the infinite diversities and inherent similarities amongst distinct communities worldwide, Appiah is arguably positioned as a very well-suited expert on identity questions. Appiah's expertise on identity topics was best illustrated in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, a well-timed endeavour in the realms of ethics and national identities. Appiah's attempt at forming global principles of ethics for human relations in *Cosmopolitanism* revolves around the fact that, in a world occupied by billions of strangers, one ought to rethink identity markers – be they religious, racial, or cultural and so on – to avoid falling prey to the exclusionary consequences of heavily identifying with these socially-constructed boundaries.⁴ In short, *Cosmopolitanism* promotes a world where distinct communities can find a shared space where fundamental human values or attributes – such as sharing ancestries or belonging to the same biological species – are understood, respected, and taken more seriously. At the same time, differences are tolerated rather than taken as grounds for conflict and indifference.⁵

The Lies that Bind, Appiah's latest attempt for a doctrine on the fundamentals of identity constructs, is divided into six chapters, of which the first half provides historical and philosophical frameworks, while the second half engages with the concepts of race, class, and culture. The crux of the author's writing in this book reaffirms and further builds upon the fundamentals of its predecessor as it attempts to reiterate and recontextualize the significance of shared human values,

² Appiah, *Lies that Bind*.

³ Appiah, *Lies that Bind*.

⁴ Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (Newyork: W.W. Norton, 2006).

⁵ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*.

irrespective of distinctions in people's beliefs or socio-political associations. In true cosmopolitan fashion, Appiah's new book promotes the promised value of developing an appreciation towards the elements of core mutuality and resemblance between diverse communities. At the same time – as per Appiah's long-held belief – avoiding a reliance on elements of dissimilarity or 'otherness' is a necessary resolution to divisive identity politics and bloody conflicts worldwide.

By drawing on other scientific fields, *The Lies that Bind* expands its predecessor's scope as it refers to a psychological-ontological dynamic he deems key to identity formation: 'essentialism.' Essentialism states that "certain categories have an underlying reality or true nature that one cannot observe directly," where the essentialized element, be it an ideology, tradition, or trait, "gives an object its identity, and is responsible for other similarities that category members share."⁶ According to the text, essentialism incorporates itself in the identity formation process in children as young as four years of age, instilling a false sense of inherent value to the labels that children receive or pick up during the early stages of their development. Socio-politically, the problematic core of essentialism is reflected in the tendency of essentialist ideologies to define nationality according to ethnic or nationalist traits rather than according to citizenship, participation, or other democratic values.

Furthermore, Appiah implicates essentialist ideologies in the entrenchment of an inaccurate social assumption that women are fundamentally indifferent to economics, philosophy, and politics, perpetuating gender inequality due to widespread inaccurate designations of male and female attributes. In light of this, the author uses his book to direct special attention to feminist theory's contributions, often overlooked in the mainstream, to identity studies. Contrary to prevalent assumptions, Appiah's book demonstrates that feminist theory has been instrumental in

⁶ Appiah, *Lies that Bind*, 25.

highlighting the shortcomings of assuming a direct link between behaviour and physical features, specifically in the realm of gender. Furthermore, Appiah credits feminist theories for helping scholars recognize and make sense of other social inequalities such as discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or culture, all elements discussed extensively in Appiah's book.

Interestingly, however, Appiah is keen on absolving identity as his book's central object of critique. Instead, he frames essentialist ideologies behind some communities' widespread tendency to engrain and ultimately weaponize their identity differences. Since identity as a social construct matters significantly to its adoptees, more often than not, this personal significance or association is abused by various groups at different times and spaces, placing the devout followers of a particular religion or culture under the influence of exploitative tactics employed by those with power and veiled agendas. In response to such dynamics, the author prescribes that individuals ought to recognize these potent, highly overlooked procedures as an ultimate necessity on the path towards a world where difference ceases to be a primary element of conflict and division between different societies.

However, the author states that it is far from enough to appreciate and pay attention to the inherent ties that connect different communities. Pleas for a more united and inclusive world are made in the book; since no culture is pure, Appiah encourages loosening up identity structures to remedy identity politics' ugly mishaps. Whether in the form of social movements or worst-case scenarios such as ethnic genocides, identity-related clashes have demonstrated an alarming ability to engulf the world in bloody conflicts every human could do well without. As the text entails, those grim possibilities could be averted if communities collectively decide to rid themselves from essentialist rigidity – by reshaping and reordering their identity associations into the more tolerant and less idealistic structures they are ought to be, to achieve a more harmonious coexistence.

In praise of Appiah's arguments on identity, his book is particularly fitting to the current socio-political climate in the United States, and increasingly worldwide – the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has been a direct reaction to the weaponization of race and ethnicity by powerful, predominantly white elites. In the text, Appiah identifies social exclusion, ethno-cultural conflict, and toxic identity politics as direct consequences of the rigidity and conservatism of nativist essentialists in fortifying their associative differences amongst the broader social polity. Appiah's validation for this argument emanates from his view that groups – be they religious, ethno-racial, or political – hold significant internal diversity rather than a fundamental, unchanging homogeneity around an essence or a "deep similarity that binds people of that identity together."⁷ Indeed, the tendency of essentialist philosophies to embed identity differences, such as on the basis of race and ethnicity, proves particularly dangerous as they perpetuate politics of domination, a key target of the BLM movement, where "race becomes the common currency of negation and affirmation, dominance and resistance."⁸ While Appiah's insights do not completely align with the BLM movement, his book offers powerful tools to help people make sense of some of the underlying identity factors that have originally paved the way for the need to establish BLM and other social movements.

Appiah's book also helps augment our understanding of race, class, and culture within the context of socio-political phenomena such as *populism*: a movement birthed out of people's utter frustration with the domination of virtually every aspect of social, political, and cultural life by a group of ultra-educated, wealthy, powerful elites. As Appiah points out, a potently visible implication of this deep resentment towards ruling elites is the steep rise of right-leaning, populist

⁷ Appiah, *Lies that Bind*, xv.

⁸ Appiah, *Lies that Bind*, 122.

leaders to power worldwide. The book reflects a particular emphasis on Donald Trump's rise to power. Globally, stark similarities can be found in the political progressions of less audacious figures such as Canadian premier Doug Ford of Ontario or Brazil's president Jair Bolsonaro amongst other populist political actors.^{9,10} It is no secret that the United States and Brazil, two important global powers recently engulfed by powerful populist waves, are currently grappling with toxic identity politics; America witnessed the epitome of populist outrage in the recent storming of Capitol Hill by Trump supporters, while populism in Brazil has placed proponents of Bolsonaro's party against Indigenous tribes in the Amazon as the Brazilian government continues to plow through their lands for developmental purposes. Indeed, as identity politics eventually intensify, social divisions and clashes may become much more frequent, leading to the dire prospect of weaker liberal democratic values in the long run.

Despite its argumentative virtues, the book may nonetheless arouse tension. A real issue with Appiah's rhetoric lies in his inclination towards opposing representation of distinct groups on the basis of their different perspectives. The text suggests that since identities are ought to be fluid or loosened up, no single group is more worthy of official recognition of their views than others as that would indicate some inherent importance to their particular identity over that of others, leading to exclusion and possible division. While there may be truth to it, such a stance is problematic because it denies the basis for some groups' cultural purity, such as in the case of the Azeri-Armenian conflict.¹¹ Armenians and Azeris have long posed equally competing claims to the Nagorno-Karabakh territory in Azerbaijan. As a result of unresolved historical and social

⁹ Michael Petrou, "The benign face of right-wing populism," *International Politics and Society*, 2018, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/regions/north-america/the-benign-face-of-right-wing-populism-2729/>.

¹⁰ Jordan Kyle and Limor Gultchin, "Populists in Power Around the World," *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, 2018, <https://institute.global/policy/populists-power-around-world>.

¹¹ Council on Foreign Relations, "Nagorno-Karabkh," 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/nagorno-karabakh>.

quandaries, as well as foreign influence, both ethnic groups find themselves today at the brink of war once again due to unresolved identity clashes.¹² Upon applying Appiah's logic to this area, it becomes evident that it falls short of providing meaningful resolutions in a conflict of such magnitude and depth. Such is the case since no party would rationally lay down their arms and attempt to loosen their identity associations without first reaching satisfactory agreements – geographical and socio-political rights in this case – to mend and reconcile historical hurts. The same could be said about the BLM movement; Appiah's calls for identity fluidity may prove futile in any attempt to apply them to black people in America and the world since their most crucial demands and resistance efforts are based on their identity coming under threat. After all, Appiah denounces the inflexibility of identity associations while the whole BLM movement has been predicated on the notion of black identity pride. Indeed, such areas of concern beg the question: *to what degree is the 'loosening of identities' effective in addressing historical hurts between clashing groups in the settlement of current feuds?*

Appiah's book adopts a moderately utopian vision when it pleads for people to try to be more fluid towards their identities, perhaps amounting to advice that errs on the side of tone-deaf. For a case in point, India's Muslim minority had been long ostracized by Hindu majority. As India's largest minority group, Indian Muslims have experienced severe socio-political and economic marginalization for a long time, and more particularly so since Narendra Modi seized power.¹³ With the coronavirus pandemic at full swing in India, "many Hindus say Muslims are deliberately attempting to spread coronavirus to wage a holy war or jihad against the majority Hindus."¹⁴ The pandemic has escalated tensions between Indian Hindus and Muslims as the former

¹² C.F.R., "Nagorno-Karabakh."

¹³ Sameer Yasir, "India is Scapegoating Muslims for the Spread of the Coronavirus," Foreign Policy, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/22/india-muslims-coronavirus-scapegoat-modi-hindu-nationalism/>.

¹⁴ Yasir, "India is Scapegoating Muslims for the Spread of the Coronavirus."

continues to scapegoat the latter for the spread of the coronavirus, and has regrettably provided one party a convenient pretext to continue its oppression of the other in the form of attacks on mosques, homes, and bodies. It seems impossible then to expect, let alone ask, marginalized groups who have borne the brunt of inequality to drop their demands to realize Appiah's remedies. Centuries of damage and trauma cannot be expected to vanish once oppressed people drop their rigid, essentialist loyalty towards their respective identities. Certainly, atrocities would not be magically erased once identities become more fluid and adaptive. On the bright side, however, what is perhaps realistic about Appiah's vision is its call for more tolerance and patience amongst the ocean of different identities. If achieved, one day, communities can then avoid a lot of trouble and nuisance down the road. The book's arguments chart a path for people, and scholarship, to reconsider current and future policies designed to combat social inequalities. In this realm, as Appiah correctly points out, economic redistributive reparations alone are not enough to resolve identity claims and conflicts. Rather, Appiah rightly eyes redistributive justice based on cultural and social capital as a decisive means in realizing his vision for identities and the world they inform.

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