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Social Sciences

Who Are We - And Should It Matter in the 21st Century?
Gary Younge
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How we categorize ourselves, in comparison with how others classify us, is the subject of these eight essays that give the reader much to contemplate. A black Briton who writes for the *Guardian* and the *Nation*, Younge is the author of two previous illuminating books: *No Place Like Home: A Black Briton's Journey Through the American South* and *Stranger in a Strange Land: Encounters in the Disunited States*. Readers intrigued by those books will not be disappointed with this one.

The author draws on his journalism career and his own life to find that gains for women, minorities, and gays demonstrate how identity leads to positive change. Conversely, the Holocaust, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur are examples of how identity turns supposed "oppressors" into the oppressed with tragic results.

Younge was raised in Hitchin, UK, a member of a black family in a white, unwelcoming village who identifies more with his mother's home in Barbados because of his treatment in Great Britain. Significantly, he explains that identities imposed on people are not often gratefully accepted.

All people have more than one identity; powerful "gatekeepers" determine identity groups to which individuals belong. When carried to extremes, gatekeepers in the United States enforced apartheid beginning in 1910 with the "one-drop" rule, which decreed who was black. The 2008 presidential election revealed how quickly identity groups can turn against each other. In the contentious South Carolina primary, African Americans and women split over the significance of Barack Obama's own identities as a child of an immigrant father, a black child raised by white parents and grandparents, an Ivy League graduate, and an organizer of the oppressed.

No phenomenon has roiled the traditional concept of identity more than globalization, which has led to increased misplaced patriotic identity in people whose lives are threatened by

loss of jobs and a bleak economic outlook. Younge's examples of pessimistic senior citizens in the US and Muslims in the UK, who turn to fundamentalism when marginalized by their countries, amplify this. Informed general readers will appreciate the author's graceful yet to-the-point essays that give insight into a world spiraling beyond our control and how identity can slow down the chaos *and* contribute to it.

Karl Helicher