Discourses of Identity in the Ancient World: Preliminary Remarks

Jakub Filonik

Assistant Professor, Department of Literature Studies (Classics),
University of Silesia in Katowice, Katowice, Poland
jakub.filonik@us.edu.pl

Janek Kucharski

Assistant Professor, Department of Literature Studies (Classics),
University of Silesia in Katowice, Katowice, Poland
jan.kucharski@us.edu.pl

What does fashion have in common with citizenship and punishment? More than meets the eye, as the five contributors to this issue of *Polis* show.¹ All three may be seen as diverse manifestations of the same phenomenon: a person's or a group's identity. This phenomenon, approached from a variety of angles, is the main theme linking our contributions. While their focus is primarily on the literary sources of ancient Greece, the contributors also venture into other domains, such as Roman civilisation, Hellenistic epigraphy, and material culture.

'Identity', as a philosophical, social or political concept, has been a major focus of attention in the humanities and social sciences for almost half a century, and the interface between language, discourse and identity enjoys a special currency in contemporary linguistics, psychology and cognitive as well as cultural studies. The linguist Martin Ehala, a strong contemporary scholarly voice in this area, has recently called for the creation of what he labels 'a proper identity studies', noting that 'in the contemporary world, we are obsessed with identity'.² But this claim *mutatis mutandis* can be also made for the classical world, which not only provides the student of identity with abundant material to explore through the lens of modern theoretical apparatuses, but also when approached through more traditional methodologies presents us with many striking parallels to contemporary phenomena.

¹ We would like to thank Peter Agocs for his help in preparing this issue.

² M. Ehala, *Signs of Identity: The Anatomy of Belonging* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 1.

In all human communities, but especially in collectivist cultures such as those of democratic Athens or Republican Rome, group affiliation constitutes a large part of a person's self-identification and generates strong emotional attachment. Moreover, while belonging to the city, the nation or the empire is one such affiliation in a person's life, one's micro-level identities related to family or social role, sex, occupation, ethnicity, or faith may play a more powerful part in shaping one's day-to-day interactions with others. Such patterns of collective identity, precisely because they are situated in a mutually reinforcing relationship with dominant social structures, enjoy a kind of sweeping universality that other forms of identity do not have, and also exercise a particularly strong influence over political developments, not least as an object and field of ideological manipulation: a discursive screen on which real or supposed collective aspirations can be projected, and group consciousness generated.

It has been recognised that specialist studies, careful to distinguish the emic perspective from the etic, usually give more comprehensive views of such identities than more general theories of 'Identity'.³ In recent years, these questions have also generated considerable interest in Classical studies (e.g. the notable contributions of Jonathan Hall to the theory and social discourse of ethnic identity in archaic and classical Greece), as the role of public discourse in shaping and manipulating cultural structures of identity has become increasingly prominent all over the world in a variety of local and global conflicts, shaping political life in ways that seemed impossible a quarter-century ago. Many of the problems we face now, from populism to social exclusion, had their equivalents in ancient societies, in the form of their own clashing group identities.

Social, collective, or group identities have been broadly understood as an individual's awareness of belonging to certain groups, coupled with the emotional and evaluative significance attached to such belonging; or, from a different angle, a system of concepts available to a person attempting to define his or her Self in a given social milieu or political system.⁴ Therefore, one's social

3 Ehala, *Signs of Identity*, pp. 1–14; T. Headland, K. Pike, and M. Harris (eds.), *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate* (Newbury Park and London: Sage Publications, 1990); J.M. Hall, 'Ancient Greek Ethnicities: Towards a Reassessment', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 58.2 (2015), pp. 15–29; K. Vlassopoulos, 'Ethnicity and Greek History: Re-examining Our Assumptions', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 58.2 (2015), pp. 1–13.

4 K. Gergen, *The Concept of Self* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971); H. Tajfel, 'La catégorisation sociale', in S. Moscovici (ed.) *Introduction à la psychologie sociale* (Paris: Larousse, 1972), H. Tajfel (ed.) *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), and H. Tajfel, (ed.) *The Social Dimension: European Developments in Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); T. Postmes and N.R. Branscombe (eds.), *Rediscovering Social Identity: Key Readings* (New York and

identity is defined in terms of a wide range of culturally relevant concepts such as the aforementioned categories of gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, political affiliation, language, religion, class, profession or occupation, and sexual orientation. Most importantly, however, it is never set in stone, but is constantly renegotiated through social interactions. According to many contemporary accounts, the social identities of individuals are not defined in terms of who one *is*, but rather as a societal recognition of who one *is said* or *claims* to be, or a persona one currently *possesses* and presents to others.⁵ Social identity thus has an ineluctable performative element.

This is the central theme of the essays in this volume, which focus on discursive and rhetorical construction of the self by a variety of social and political groups in Classical Antiquity, often on the basis of imagined traits and through constant reinvention of tradition.⁶ Identity here is studied, in other words, as a socially constructed, dynamic discourse-world whose terms and frames of reference are constantly in motion, and whose elements may appear distinctly different depending on one's position in the social, economic and political structures and interests that define the life of a given community or state. They are subject not just to changes or readjustments but also appropriation, chiefly in the course of communication, which includes most prominently public rhetoric, but can extend to all other forms of discourse.

In the contemporary world, with its ever-growing collections of 'most influential speeches', as well as its everyday mass-media commentaries, political manifestos, and public debates, a discernible motif or underlying theme seems to be the appeal to the identities of the individual based on social identity-frames. Many such appeals remain unexplored on the level of their linguistic

Hove: Psychology Press, 2010); R. Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 4th edn. (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

- 5 S. Stryker and P.J. Burke, 'The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory', *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63.4 (2001), pp. 284–297; Ehala, *Signs of Identity*.
- 6 See E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.) *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, rev. ed.); J. Fentress and C. Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1992); M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*. Edited, translated, and with an introduction by L.A. Coser (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); A. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); J.M. Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), and Hall, 'Ancient Greek Ethnicities'; S.E. Alcock, *Archaeologies of the Greek Past: Landscape, Monuments and Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Vlassopoulos, 'Ethnicity and Greek History'; and on Greek ethnic identities, J. McNerney (ed.) *A Companion to Ethnicity in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

richness or the technical skill with which they manipulate the peculiar mixture of rational and emotional factors characterizing identity-discourse. Rhetorical criticism can play a strong role in such an exploration, particularly when deployed to investigate the political identity-discourse of classical culture which was utterly imbued, through its educational systems and the particularity of its literary systems of discourse, with rhetoric.

While not confining themselves to the *political* in a narrow sense, the contributors remain curious about the means through which people's sense of being *themselves* as opposed to *others* was conceptualised in ancient times. In an attempt to discern linguistic and rhetorical patterns in such appeals to identity, this project focuses on the ways identities were addressed, reconstructed, and exploited, primarily in the times of classical Greece, when many such techniques were first given pivotal place in people's socio-political experiences. Classicists and ancient historians have many times delved into this field, and some of these phenomena have been examined on their own culturally emic terms, rather than as part of a general study of identity. But many of them still remain unexplored.

This volume is partly based on papers presented at the *Linguistic Representations of Identity in Rhetoric Ancient and Modern* conference held at Jagiellonian University in Krakow, 12–14 June 2017, in co-operation with UCL. It aims therefore to identify some key themes in the way Greek and Roman identities were constructed and reshaped in discourse and to further these discussions by focussing on original and fresh approaches in researching the complexity of identities in the ancient world. We propose to do this through in-depth readings that illustrate the ways and techniques by which people's identities were shaped by ideological discourse and rhetoric in different Classical cultures and genres, while also demonstrating the relevance of these texts, their concerns, and their ideological evasions and misrepresentations to contemporary problems.

In the volume, our contributors delve into questions that transcend the chronological limits of Classical Studies, even though our focus here is on ancient Greece and Rome. These include: how does one negotiate the tensions between the necessarily exclusionary nature of identity-shaping (every Self demands its own inimical, demonized Other) and an overarching civic ideology based on democratic equality? What rhetorical tools were at the disposal of a public figure or a writer seeking to cast himself, his adversaries, his audience or his characters in a particular identity or role? How do you create a sense of continuity and belonging in a society exposed to the frantic pace of historical and cultural change? All these challenges seem to be just as relevant in classical antiquity as

they are nowadays, in our age of globalization, mass migration, the growth – or re-emergence – of a politics based on nationalism and posited ethnic purity, and the simultaneous, paradoxical rise of secularism and religious faith, all of which have helped to erode well-established identities that one might, a generation ago, have taken for granted. While we resist the temptation to draw simplistic parallels, we wish to approach the ancient material from a variety of modern perspectives. This volume is thus conceived as a topical contribution to the ongoing discussions on our socio-political realities and discourses, and a way to bridge the key concepts studied by social and political scientists in the contemporary world with their counterparts – and often origins – in antiquity. The volume consists of five papers:

S. Douglas Olson looks through the lens of Aristophanic comedy – so fond of producing and ridiculing barbarians on stage – at Persian fashion, presented as an outward manifestation of the barbarian Other. He takes this as a cue to reassess the familiar Greek tropes of Oriental riches and Asiatic effeminacy, and contrasts it with an episode from modern history, the Cherokee embassy to London (1730), or rather its subsequent pictorial representation, one which involved a very different pattern of ‘refashioning’ the Other.

Janek Kucharski, beginning with Athenian rhetoric but also drawing heavily from comedy, argues for the essential Otherness of corporal penalties in Athens, which are frequently seen to discursively brand those subject to them as ‘slaves’ or ‘barbarians’, as opposed to free men and citizens (even though frequently meted out in reality also to those who enjoyed this status).

Eleni Volonaki examines the rhetoric of religious identity in two cases of ‘impeachment’ (*eisangelia*): *Lysias’ Against Nicomachus* and *Lycurgus’ Against Leocrates*. Despite the apparently secular nature of the relevant charges, she argues that the deployment of religious discourse and construction of religious identities in such prosecutions was of paramount importance.

Peter Liddel’s study focusses upon one of the primary channels of expressing group sentiments: epigraphic publication. He explores the language of honorific inscriptions in late classical and early Hellenistic Erythrai, looking for formal expressions of communal identity embedded into them and the value-systems with which they ostentatiously engage.

Brian Krostenko with his paper takes us to Rome and shows how Cicero in his two speeches, *De lege agraria* I and II, tinkers with the identities of the Roman people on the one hand, and of the senatorial class on the other. As the speeches are directed to different audiences (the senate in I, the people in II), we are shown how their identities determine Cicero’s choice of arguments to further his political agenda.