PART 2

Constructing and Managing Identity
Introduction to Part 2

Today, it is almost a truism to claim, as James C. Scott so emphatically did, that “[a]ll identities, without exception have been socially constructed,” regardless of whether these were invented by, or imposed on, those who bear them.\textsuperscript{1} Nevertheless, it is a realization which rightly continues to bear fruit in historical research, improving our understanding of who constructed which identities at what time and for what ends. Take the example of the seemingly innocent descriptions of slaves recorded in the court registers of Galata (part of Istanbul), studied by Nur Sobers-Khan. While on the surface these seem to have served the purpose of identification, to members of the urban elites in the sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire, steeped in the lore of physiognomy and ethnography current at the time, such superficially innocent adjectives as “blue-eyed” and “Russian” carried with them a host of meanings which went far beyond mere description. Instead, they imposed certain identities and, in doing so, subjected the slaves to expectations of behavior corresponding to these identities.\textsuperscript{2} In this example, identity thus served the dual purpose of classifying an Other and domesticating him or her for integration into the Ottoman world.

If identity is socially constructed, it is also socially constructive. Indeed, identity can be understood in relational terms as a claim of belonging to a certain group. As such, it is at once an expression of a connection between individuals and communities as well as formative of precisely that connection to which it makes a claim. Like any other, this claim is contestable. Different parties may have different stakes in a given individual’s identification, thus turning identity into a site of contestation. This aspect becomes most apparent in conflicts over legal and juridical status attached to certain identities, as for example in the context of the release of captives by the Ottoman state without ransom under the terms of the peace treaties concluded with Russia after
