Gerald Izenberg, *Identity: The Necessity of a Modern Idea* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 552 pp.

Reviewed by **Andrew S. Gross**

Identity was a problem before it was an idea, and it was a given before it became either. Two world wars and a half-century of social movements challenged the traditions that once made identity seem inevitable enough to be taken for granted. Gerald Izenberg's definitive study addresses this story of social and personal transformation in three complementary ways. First, it provides a genealogy of identity, paying particular attention to those historical forces—really the forces of modernity—that gave this "modern idea" its urgency. The bulk of the study is an anatomy of identity providing detailed accounts of relevant political and intellectual debates. Finally, the study pleads for "the necessity" of identity against those favoring "the rival individualist idea of self" (263). Identity is *necessary*, Izenberg argues, because it is *contingent*, acknowledging those accidents of birth and station—place, time, bodily appearance and health, social situation—that play such determinate roles in existence (450).

The "necessity of contingency" is an existential turn of phrase denoting the material conditions of human existence, or what Sartre calls our "facticity" (104, 415). In a sense Izenberg's book provides the social and political flesh to Sartre's bare-bone, phenomenological conception of selfhood, or rather to the concepts he developed after beginning to grapple with anti-Semitism and colonialism. Like Heidegger before him, Sartre initially saw identity as a bad-faith exercise in self-deception. People weren't condemned to be French or bourgeois or any of the other identities that intellectuals of his generation understood as contributing to the debacle of World War I; they were condemned to be free. Unlike Heidegger, who sought to alleviate the anxiety of freedom by rooting the individual in national and racial destiny, Sartre came to realize that freedom was limited by the ways others see us: as Jews, racialized colonial subjects, etc. (84-85; 151-52). Thus identity, first conceived as a metaphysical impossibility, morphed into a concept for registering the tension between individual self-determination and ascriptive group membership. Simone de Beauvoir's exploration of ascription in terms of the complementary concept of the Other turned identity into a powerful tool for analyzing political relations (97, 152). Existentialism might celebrate the freedom of individual consciousness, but those who are seen as the Other in the way women are seen by men, know that actual liberties are pegged to social roles.

Identity in postwar France quickly established its political relevance, but in the US it became known through psychoanalytic theories of child development. Erik Erikson, a refugee from Nazi-occupied Europe, was so successful in popularizing the concept of

"identity crisis" that the phrase has detached itself from its originator. In the 1950s America that embraced his work, Erikson observed that young people often went through a period of intense self-questioning before settling down to their own careers. His notion of identity was not explicitly political, but it did display the relational contours familiar from existentialism. Self-perception, necessary for establishing the continuous sense of selfhood that forms a basis for future-directedness, is filtered through the perceptions of others, in this case parents and society (107). From its theoretical beginnings in phenomenology and psychology, identity would retain this basic dyadic structure. Identity does not refer to a stable or essential self but to a continuous series of personally experienced relations between individual and group, self and other, and permanence and change (396-97, 406, 431).

Identity's unique ability to register the relation between self and other (and self as Other) helped it develop into a full-blown political program during the Civil Rights movement. Izenberg insists that this was a grassroots transformation driven by activists rather than theoreticians (399). Responding to the lack of equal opportunity in a society that paid lip service to equal rights, African Americans seized upon identity as a way of articulating their predicament. Blackness, first identified as a stigma, was transformed into a source of pride. The strategy that would later be called identity politics spread to the women's movement and the struggle for gay rights. Identity was what these diverse groups had in common because, even though identity wasn't supposed to matter in a society devoted to liberal individualism, it did. Individualism, from the perspective of a movement activist, was just identity in disguise, and those excluded by the official abstraction—the "empty" liberal self as white, heterosexual, and male—had to band together to make their demands heard.

The conflictual nature of group identity, honed through political struggle, has also been confirmed through empirical research. Izenberg points to the work of social psychologist Henri Tajfel, a Jewish refugee who lost his family in the Holocaust, whose experiments show that personal identity is predicated on group identification, and that groups define themselves against other groups (357-60). The differences can be trivial, and in the experiments they were wholly contrived. Research by Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, and Anthony Smith suggests the differences are equally contrived when the stakes and populations are much greater than those simulated under laboratory conditions. Nations constitute themselves as groups that individual citizens can identify with, by fabricating ethnic traditions that set them at odds with other groups. As Izenberg puts it, summarizing Smith, "In essence, a nation was a politicized ethnicity, adding sovereignty over a territorial homeland with unified legal and economic institutions to the ethnic sense of common name, origins, myths, histories, and culture" (222).

Izenberg's ambitious study follows the history of identity through multiple political and philosophical registers, across national and disciplinary boundaries, through debates over the differences between race and ethnicity, sex and gender, and even onto both horns of a theoretical dilemma—as when ethnic identity appears to be both ascriptive or imposed on minority groups from without and affirmative or invented by majorities as a form of national ideology. The sheer scope of Izenberg's project gives the book a sometimes overwhelming quality. The anatomy of identity, ranging from the early use of the term by the Combahee River Collective in 1977 to the New Social Movement theory, from existentialism to virtue ethics, from psychology to anthropology, from Canada to Germany, is often daunting in its detail. It would be possible to disagree with the balance Izenberg strikes between these various foci and fields. For instance, while the book begins with modernist novels, it quickly shifts to midcentury social science, in effect relegating literature to a pretheoretical role and rendering the study slightly less useful to scholars in the humanities. Disciplinary squabbles aside, Izenberg provides useful accounts of key thinkers, theories, activists, and movements from the end of World War I to the new millennium. This impressive intellectual history will remain an indispensable reference guide for years to come.

For literary scholars, and those concerned with the significance of identity for their own lives, the chapters dealing with virtue ethics seem most promising. Izenberg endorses Alasdair MacIntyre's "concept of the narrative identity of the self as the only viable alternative to the empty self of liberal theory" (428). He also offers a corrective to what he sees as the parochialism of MacIntyre's point of view. Virtue ethics does not pursue an abstract notion of the good as generalizable principle or quantifiable benefit, but makes the good dependent on the way one wants to live one's life. This teleological criterion presupposes a certain narrative coherence. We tell stories because we live them first, as Izenberg is fond of saying. A first-person life story that points to the future by taking stock of the past, defining the self in relation to others, is what thinkers from Sartre and Erikson on have been calling identity. MacIntyre argues that the stories we tell about ourselves come out of particular cultural traditions; while this opens identity to the influence of others through the internal debate that constitutes any culture, it does not alleviate the problem of the Other, or offer guidance on how to decide between the competing narratives of, say, the colonizer and the colonized. Izenberg's solution, perhaps surprisingly, is to turn back to individualism and the abstract liberal self, at least in a modified sense.

His guide here is Kwame Anthony Appiah, who does not dismiss the importance of identity but does express concerns about its limitations (438). What to do when one story about identity denies individual freedoms to others? Izenberg, following Appiah, argues that the notion of different narrative trajectories and traditions needs to be supplemented

by a consideration of the quality all selves have *qua* selves, namely "our common capacity to tell and understand stories about our relationship to the world" (442). Movement activists revealed individualism to be a disguised version of identity; Izenberg argues that identity implies an ethical commitment to the individual. Our narratives define what is good for ourselves and those close to us; it is acceptable to privilege these goods, Izenberg argues, as long as we do not rule out what we owe to others as selves (444). All stories teach us that we are all subject to suffering and vulnerability (437). This is the most necessary contingency of all. Identity is a narrative of the self that, in Izenberg's formulation, marks not only a relation but an obligation to the Other, and an obligation to the future.