

# HISTORIEDIDAKTIKK I NORDEN 7

## Bruk og misbruk av historien

Redigert av:

Sirkka Ahonen  
Rolf Grankvist  
Christer Karlegård  
Anette Køhlert  
Svein Lorentzen  
Vagn Oluf Nielsen  
Ola Svein Stugu

NORDISK KONFERANSE OM HISTORIEDIDAKTIKK

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## HISTORY AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY REFLECTIONS ON A CONTESTED AND INTRICATE ISSUE

Bernard Eric Jensen

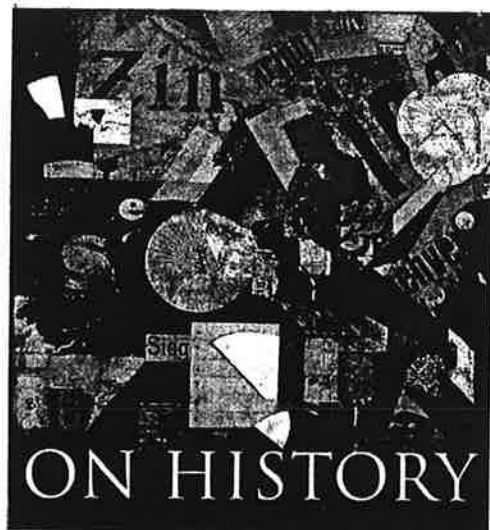
On opening *The Contemporary History Handbook* (1996) the eye of many a reader will be caught by the rather flashy titles that appear in the table of contents. Among the more catchy are Joe Bailey's *Postmodernism and postmodernity: a user's guide*, Richard Crockett's *The 'end of history' debate revisited*, Shamit Saggar's *Whose history? National narratives in multiracial societies* and Lucy Noakes' *'Sexing the archive': gender in contemporary history*. Such titles indicate that academic historians have begun to appropriate some of the techniques that can be employed in order to capture the attention of potential readers. However, the title that first caught my eye was the one given to the very first contribution in the handbook. It excited my curiosity because it sent a clear signal of warning about an imminent danger. It is entitled *The new threat to history*, and in it Eric Hobsbawm argues that the emergence of identity politics constitutes the overarching threat to history as an academic discipline at the present time:

"Attempts to replace history by myth and invention are not merely bad intellectual jokes. (...) Myths and inventions are essential to the politics of identity by which groups of people today, defining themselves by ethnicity, religion or the past or present borders of States, try to find certainty in an uncertain and shaking world by saying, 'We are different from and better than the Others'. They are our concern at the universities because the people who formulate those myths and inventions are educated people, schoolteachers lay and clerical, professors (not many, I hope), journalists, television and radio producers. Today most of them will have gone to some university. Make no mistake about it. History is not ancestral memory or collective tradition. It is what people learned from priests, schoolmasters, the writers of history books, and the compilers of magazine articles and television programmes. It is important for historians to remember their responsibility, which is, above all, to stand aside from the passions of identity politics - even if they also feel them. After all, we are human beings too" (Hobsbawm 1996b p. 8-9).

*The new threat to history* was Hobsbawm's third attempt at drawing his readers' attention to the perils of identity politics within a short span of time. He had first hoisted a flag of warning in *The Historian between the Quest for the Universal and the Quest for Identity*, his contribution to the Diogenes booklet on *The Social Responsibility of the Historian*, which was published in 1994. His next intervention was made in a lecture on *Identity Politics and the Left* in London in May 1996; it was shortly thereafter published in an issue of *New Left Review*. The third was his aforementioned contribution to *The Contemporary History Handbook* (1996). Finally, Hobsbawm decided to re-issue his first intervention under the title *Identity History Is Not Enough*, and it now forms the concluding chapter of his collection of essays *On History*, which was published in 1997. It is of course no coincidence that he has chosen Kurt Schwitters' painting *Siegbild* (c.

1920) as the cover illustration for this collection of essays, it may be taken to indicate that Hobsbawm feels convinced that his approach to history will be the victorious one.

## ERIC HOBSBAWM



Hobsbawm sees the emergence of identity politics in the main as "a consequence of the extraordinary rapid and profound upheavals and transformations of human society" that have taken place during the latter part of the 20th century, but he also makes the point that one should see the spread of identity politics as being related to "the rise of 'postmodernist' intellectual fashions in Western universities". When writing about identity politics Hobsbawm has been addressing two different audiences - his professional colleagues as well as his fellow supporters of the political Left. The reason for this dual focus is moreover quite clear. The emergence of identity politics represents - as he sees it - a decisive threat both to the existence of history as an academic discipline and to the existence of the Left as a political movement.

With regard to academic history, Hobsbawm challenges those of his colleagues who have tended to support and legitimate existing forms of identity politics, and he therefore also goes on to stipulate that professional historians should strive to keep clear of all forms of identity politics and instead remain committed to a "universalism (...)

because it is the necessary condition for understanding the history of humanity, including that of any special section of humanity". With regard to the Left, Hobsbawm attacks those who have dived "head first into the deep waters of identity politics" and started to see "the Left essentially as a coalition of minority groups and interests: of race, gender or other cultural preferences and lifestyles". In contrast to such people he wants to defend the position that "the political project of the Left is universalist: it is for *all* human beings. (...) And identity politics is essentially not for everybody but for the members of a specific group only".

I think that Hobsbawm has done right in trying to initiate a debate about how one is to understand the relationship of history to identity politics. Not only is it a very urgent issue at this point in time, it is also a rather intricate one. Yet, the position from which Hobsbawm has been arguing is - as I see it - neither reasonably consistent nor theoretically viable, but I shall at this point only draw attention to the more obvious problems in his line of reasoning.

It is only by employing a rather special definition of identity politics that Hobsbawm avoids running into a manifest self-contradiction in his reflections on the relationship of history to a politics of identity. He thinks that it is professionally and politically legitimate when he has used the writing of history - as he frequently has done over the years - to denounce capitalism as well as to further a socialist alternative, yet finds it professionally and politically unacceptable when black and/or feminist academics decide to use their history writing in attempts to challenge and reclaim some existing, yet stigmatised identities. When comparing such uses of history I think that it would be much more obvious to begin with the basic points of similarity rather than the differences: in both cases - one can argue - historical scholarship is being used to further some political or cultural cause. Hobsbawm however only wants to look at the differences: the first represents - as he sees it - a legitimate use of historical scholarship, whereas the second is to be seen as an abuse or misuse of academic history writing.

Thus, when Hobsbawm uses history to attack the right wing politics of Reagan and Thatcher and to urge the Left to become "the voice of the whole people" and fight for liberty, equality and fraternity, he does not think of himself as being involved in the deplorable business of identity politics because, as he says, both the historical profession and the Left are committed to a kind of universalism. However, when feminists use history to attack the gender-blindness of the traditional Left and seek to further the development of gendered forms of collective identity, Hobsbawm opposes and rejects them for being involved in the pursuit of identity politics. He feels justified in doing so because they are committed to a kind of particularism: "identity groups are about themselves, for themselves, and nobody else".

It is only by defining 'identity politics' in a rather special way that Hobsbawm succeeds in not openly contradicting himself. He wants to reserve the term 'identity politics' for those instances in which people use history to justify the pursuit of what is manifestly a set of group-specific interests and values. If people on the other hand should decide to use history to legitimate a set of more universalist interests and values, it does not count as being involved in identity politics. I find this way of thinking about history and identity politics much too narrow and hair-splitting. It is not that I dispute that there are

groups of people who pursue a politics of identity in Hobsbawm's sense of the term, it is for other reasons that I find his position less than adequate. Not only is there the evident problem of his having bypassed the question of how one goes about determining the perspective from which a specific set of interests and values may be said to be either particularist or universal. More importantly, his definition of 'identity politics' does not apply to the many instances in which political movements on the Left have quite manifestly sought to influence the actual processes of identity formation by challenging existing forms of cultural hegemony.

How history is to be related to identity and politics is today a contested issue, and it is moreover an intricate one. For that reason it is not easy to find out where to start and where to finish one's own reflections. Yet, I think that it should be possible to work out a position, which is a little more consistent and theoretically viable than the one found in Hobsbawm's writings. In the following I shall therefore attempt to disentangle some of the issues that arise when one starts to reflect on the relationship of history to a politics of identity, and I shall be wanting to see if the different understandings of this relationship are due, at least partly, to differences in the understanding of one or more of the key concepts: 'history', 'identity' and 'politics'. However, to trace when and why the terms 'identity politics' and 'politics of identity' became part of the standard vocabulary of academics working in the human and social sciences may well turn out to be the best place to start such an inquiry.

#### New terms make their appearance

The use of the concept 'identity' is not something new in an academic setting; it has been employed in theological and philosophical writings as well as in psychological and social theory for many centuries. For instance, in the 1694 edition of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* there is a chapter on *Identity and Diversity* in which John Locke attempts to define what is to be understood by the term 'personal identity'. Yet, although 'identity' is a concept with a long and well-established history, it is only in recent years that people have started to combine or fuse the concept of 'identity' with that of 'politics'. As far as I have been able to ascertain, the terms 'identity politics' and 'politics of identity' first begin to gain a more widespread currency in an Anglo-American setting towards the end of the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> It seems to have occurred around the same time as Joan Wallach Scott published her book on *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988). In that book Scott does not employ the two terms, yet she is certainly concerned with the issues to which these terms have come to refer:

"Experience is not seen as the objective circumstances that condition identity; identity is not an objectively determined sense of self defined by needs and interests; politics is not the collective coming to consciousness of similarly situated individual subjects. Rather politics is the process by which plays of power and knowledge constitute identity and experience. Identities and experiences are variable phenomena in this view, discursively organised in particular contexts or configurations. (...) For political identity, like social institutions and cultural symbols, is a form of knowledge production. Rather than there being a separation between feminist politics and academic studies of gender, the two are part of the same political project: a collective attempt to confront and change the existing distribution of power" (Scott 1988, p. 5-6).

The terms 'identity politics' and 'politics of identity' can be traced back to the early 1980's, when they first appear to have been coined and used in the context of North-American debates on gender and race. The earliest use that I so far have come across is to be found in *A Black Feminist Statement* which was the contribution made by the Cambahee River Collective to *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983). 'Identity politics' refers here to the idea that one attempts to make one's identity the point of departure for one's political struggle and to use it moreover as a motivating force. This approach was then taken over by Minnie Bruce Pratt who tried to develop it further in *Identity: Skin Blood Heart*, her contribution to the anthology *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism* (1984).<sup>ii</sup> As from the end of the 1980s the concept of 'identity politics' can be seen to crop up with fair regularity in North American academic writing. In 1988 Linda Alcoff, for instance, took it up for discussion in her *Signs* article on *Cultural Feminism and Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory*, and Phelan Shane employed it in her book *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community* from 1989.

The first time that I personally remember adverting to the use of these new terms was when reading *New Times. The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*. This book was published in 1989, and in it Rosalind Brunt has an essay on *The Politics of Identity*. She starts off by making the point that the term 'identity politics' is used as a shorthand term to refer to "movements organising around sexuality, gender and ethnicity and working to translate 'the personal is the political' into everyday practice". Yet, what mainly concerns Brunt is to put forward the idea that "the question of identity is at the heart of any transformatory project" and that "unless and until we have an adequate recognition of the ways identities work, we are not going to be that effective at world changing". The 'we' to which Brunt is referring is that of the British Left. She then goes on to make an attempt at defining what is to be understood by a 'politics of identity', this is done by reference to the kind of approach that Antonio Gramsci employed in his *Prison Notebooks*:

"A politics of identity (...) would start by tracking down those traces [of historical process in human consciousness and] try to make an 'inventory' of personal history because it recognises that [people] are determined by circumstances outside their control, but in the process of understanding [these traces people] can become self-determining" (Brunt 1989, p. 154).

Stanley Aronowitz' book on *The Politics of Identity. Class, Culture, Social Movement* (1992) may be seen as further evidence of the fact that the terms in question originally were coined and developed in response to the challenges which the questions of gender, race and ethnicity were presenting to a radical or leftist approach to politics. Another text indicating the same is *Place and the Politics of Identity* (1993). On the cover of this collection of essays the following question is posed: "Which way is Left for a cultural politics of difference?"

As from the mid-1990s, the concepts of 'identity politics' and 'politics of identity' begin cropping up in ongoing discussions of social theory. This became apparent in 1994 with the publication of the collection of essays which Craig Calhoun edited and entitled *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. It is also evident in the book that Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay edited and published under the title *Questions of Cultural Identity*

(1996).<sup>iii</sup> In the latter both terms appear in the index with a fair number of references. One can moreover point to Kevin Hetherington's study of *Expressions of Identity. Space, Performance, Politics* (1998), which is an attempt at making a fairly radical re-shuffling of social theory in the light of the issues to which a politics of identity gives rise. In this latter work - it is worth noting - the two terms are used with such a frequency that it no longer makes any sense to list them in the index.

In the second half of the 90s books are published that openly declare that there is a need to move beyond identity politics. There is the collection of essays edited by John Anner under the title *Beyond Identity Politics. Emerging Social Justice Movements in Communities of Color* from 1996. There is also the collection of essays edited by Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman under the title *Social Postmodernism. Beyond identity politics* (1996), which wants, among other things, to explain why postmodern approaches to politics have had a special appeal to American academics on the Left. When one takes a closer look at the content of these two books, however, it becomes clear that they are in no way trying to reject the idea of identity politics as such. Rather, they are seeking to move beyond the more simplistic forms of identity politics - for instance, those based upon an essentialist understanding of human identity.

#### Looking into the background: the redefining of politics

The increased use of the terms 'identity politics' and 'politics of identity' may be explained, it seems to me, in two different, yet somewhat related ways. In the first instance one will point to the new political and social movements from the last third/quarter of the 20th century, where one sought to develop new approaches to and understandings of politics. One will in other words attempt to explain the emergence of identity politics by pointing to some epoch specific traits of contemporary Western society.

There does not seem to be much doubt about where the terms 'identity politics' and 'politics of identity' have their origins. Not only do they appear to have their actual roots in some of the political movements that came to play a significant role in Western societies as from the late 1960s, they were in fact originally coined in order to pinpoint what was special about these very movements. Some movements were formed around racial or ethnic markers (African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Afro-Caribbeans), others consisted of people of the same sex (feminists), others again were groups of people with another sexual orientation than the dominant one (gays, lesbians). One of the traits that these groups had in common was that they all felt marginalized from established political discourses and felt that they were only given the right to exist on the periphery of the dominant political culture.

One of the aims of these movements was to challenge and reclaim an identity that existed in social contexts, yet normally appeared as being a stigmatised identity. This was done by an attempt to valorise the devalued pole in the sets of dichotomised categories that are used in society to describe and classify people - for instance such standard dichotomies as white/black, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual. One of the political aims of these new movements was precisely to become recognised and

accepted as different from other groups in society, thus emphasising difference rather than commonality, and this kind of politics had for that very reason also to become a politics of difference. It is in this context that a book like Phelan Shane's on *Identity Politics. Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community* (1989) fits in, and it is this whole way of thinking that is taken up for critical review in *Beyond Identity Politics* (1996). However, it is worth noting that Lusane Clarence prefaces this attempt to move beyond the more simplistic forms of identity politics by making the following points:

"Victories! More than anything, *Beyond Identity Politics* (...) is about victories won by communities of color, victories that come from commitment, determination, and faith in the ability of ordinary people to fight for fairness and justice. (...) Identity is one of these resources, or rather, the sense of solidarity and connection identity can foster. However, identity politics, whether in the guise of nationalism, feminism, or some other form of political expression, is on the defensive these days. Identity politics has been increasingly criticised by activists, intellectuals, and policy-makers as narrow and ineffective in addressing the needs of those groups that have been marginalized by the rest of society. (...) Many activists and pundits forget, however, that identity politics is as often a matter of necessity as it is a matter of choice. Some activists have the luxury of choosing their battles or picking their next campaign. But for many of the activists whose voices ring out in this book, their choice was to struggle or perish. In that context, identity politics evolves as part of the arsenal of weapons required to sustain the struggle and fight back through its many twists and turns, advances and setbacks, victories and (hopefully temporary) defeats" (Anner 1996, p. 1-2).

As one begins to survey the movements and struggles that have significantly changed the political agenda of Western societies over the last three to four decades, it becomes apparent that there have been some very good reasons to invent and employ such terms as 'identity politics' and 'politics of identity'. Not only do they have their actual origin in these movements; they also appear to be appropriate terms when one wants to pinpoint one of the distinguishing features of the ongoing struggles in contemporary Western societies. The fact that the two terms are new, and that identity politics appears to be a distinguishing feature of contemporary society, does not however imply that the phenomena in question are to be considered wholly new. Thus, as Craig Calhoun rightly points out in *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (1994), there can be found numerous examples of identity having been the focus of political struggles during earlier periods. What appears to be new is that many people nowadays see the formation of identities as one of the pivotal sites of struggle in a society. This was not the case earlier.

Identity politics did not only add a new item to an established political agenda, it also necessitated a re-thinking of traditional approaches to politics and democracy. Rosalind Brunt made this point in her contribution to *The New Times* (1989). From the very outset she made it clear to the reader that:

"the question of identity is at the heart of any transformatory project (...). [It concerns] a politics whose starting point is about recognising the degree to which political activity and effort involves a continuous process of making and re-making ourselves - and our selves in relation to others" (Brunt 1989 p. 150-51).



William E. Connolly's *Identity/Difference. Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (1991) is one of the new studies which have tried to explore the consequences of a politics of identity for a theory of democracy. Connolly puts forward his theory of an "agonistic democracy", which is defined as "a practice that affirms the indispensability of identity to life, disturbs the dogmatization of identity and folds care for the protean diversity of human life into the strife and interdependence of identity/difference". It is not possible - as Connolly sees it - to evade an involvement in identity politics, but there is certainly room for trying to side step some of its most blatant pitfalls. The main pitfall of identity politics stems from a widespread inclination to see one's own identity as 'the one true identity', and Connolly suggests that one of the best ways of combating such an inclination is to track down and expose the histories of those categories that are being used in contemporary identity politics.

Another attempt at re-thinking politics and democracy in the light of the issues raised by identity politics is the collection of essays which Jeffrey Weeks has edited and published under the title *The Lesser Evil and the Greater Good. The Theory and Politics of Social Diversity* (1994). It takes as its starting point the collapse and demise of those emplotted stories that in the past shaped Western thinking and living: today "the founding solidities of History, Progress, Reason, Science, Identity, Community, Solidarity (...) have crumbled", and this group of authors have therefore set themselves the task of trying to re-think politics in a situation in which the agenda is being set by such contested concepts as 'heterogeneity', 'fluidity' and 'hybridity', 'reflexivity' and 'contingency'. One of the issues that tends to crop up in such a setting is the difficult question of how one in a democracy is to think about and react to difference and diversity. The title of Week's book is an attempt to introduce a new political metaphor in order to strike the desired balance between a respect for difference and recognition of common concerns:

"Identities are not fixed essences, locked into eternal difference. They are fluid possibilities, the elements of which can be reassembled in new political and cultural conditions. Politics is not, therefore, a power struggle between natural subjects. It is a struggle for the very articulation of identity, in which the possibilities remain open for political values which can validate both diversity and solidarity" (Weeks 1994 p. 12).

#### Looking into the background: a new key concept

The second way of explaining the increased use of the terms 'identity politics' and 'politics of identity' is to draw attention to a significant shift in the contemporary ways of understanding social theory. One will in other words attempt to explain the increased use of these terms by pointing to a more general change in the ways in which scholars understand action and society, whether present or past. When Rosalind Brunt first employed the terms 'identity politics' and 'politics of identity' in *The New Times. The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s* (1989), she was wholly aware of the specific origin and specialised meaning of these terms. Yet, it is also apparent that she did not want to use the two terms in such a way that they would only be understood as referring to a set of special traits of specific groups. Rather, she wanted to employ these terms in such a way that they could be used to pinpoint a set of recurrent patterns in all human action and groups.

The other way of explaining the increased use of these new terms is by noting the fact that over the past two decades an increasing number of scholars have begun to see 'identity' and 'identity formation' as some of the most central and decisive concepts in social theory. One way of illustrating this shift in scholarly thinking is by adverting to the fact that identity does not appear as an entry in either the first or the revised second edition of Raymond Williams' *Keywords. A vocabulary of culture and society* (1976/1983). Were such book to be published today, it certainly would have to have such an entry. However, for contemporary readers it does not come as a great surprise when Richard Jenkins in his book on *Social Identity* (1996) makes the point that the concept of 'identity' appears to be one of the prevailing signs of the times in which we are living at present:

"'Identity' has become one of the unifying frameworks of intellectual debate in the 1990s. Everybody, it seems, has something to say about it: sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, psychologists, geographers, historians, and philosophers. The prospectus is crowded: from Anthony Giddens' discussion of modernity and self-identity, to postmodernism's emphasis upon 'difference'; from feminism's various attempts to deconstruct gendered social conventions, to perplexity about the resurrection of nationalism and ethnicity as significant political forces. At every turn we encounter discourses about identity. And not only identity. The talk is also about change: the emergence of new identities, the resurgence of old ones, the transformation of existing ones. About a new politics of identity" (Jenkins 1996, p. 7).

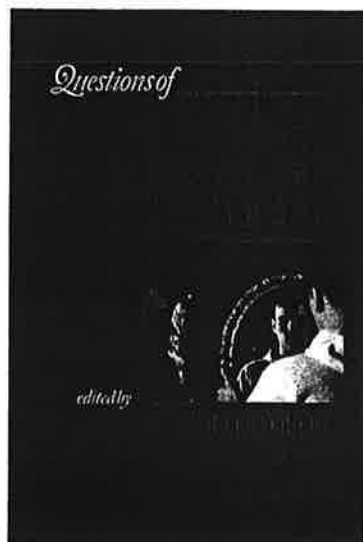
There is more than one way of explaining the mounting interest in issues related to identity and identity formation. It has partly been linked with a growing interest in coming to a better understanding of why certain people feel and perceive themselves as belonging together - i.e. why they see themselves as part of what Benedict Anderson has aptly phrased an "imagined community". Whereas scholars earlier tried to handle this set of problems by working with notions such as a 'group mind' or a 'national character', most academics nowadays try to understand these processes in terms of the making and re-making of collective identities.

The interest in identity has likewise been linked to an interest in coming to a better understanding of the fact that different people/groups think and act differently. The understanding of many forms of human action and group differences has not been furthered - it is being asserted - by the established forms of social theory. Rather the contrary is the case since much of the available theory has had a conception of a universal actor as its base. When one however begins to look more closely at the so-called universal actor, it turns out to be a rather particular kind of person: the actor appears most of all to be something very like a traditional white male Western businessman. This point is very neatly conveyed by the cover illustration on Craig Calhoun's *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (1994).

notion that culturally based identities are to be seen as being equivalent to items of clothing which one may change more or less whenever one wants to do so.

Thus, in *Social Identity* (1996) Jenkins bases his theory on a distinction between primary and secondary identities and defines the former as those that become established in the very early part of a life history: selfhood, human-ness, gender and under certain social circumstances also kinship and ethnicity. Although primary identities may be modified as time goes, they are - says Jenkins - "more robust and resilient to change in later life than other identities". In his essay on *The Centrality of Culture* (1997) Hall employs the metaphor of sedimentation in order to describe the way in which identities are formed, and such a metaphor conveys a very different set of associations than Hobsbawm's one about the changing of garments.

"Identity emerges (...) in the dialogue between the meanings and definitions which are represented to us by the discourses of a culture and our willingness (consciously or unconsciously) to respond to the summons of those meanings, to be hailed by them, to step into the subject position constructed for us by one of the discourses (...) - in short, to invest our sympathies and feelings in one or other of those images, to identity. What we call 'our identities' are probably better conceptualised as the sedimentations over time of those different identifications or positionalities we have taken up and tried to 'live', as it were, from the inside, no doubt inflected by the particular mix of circumstances, feelings, histories and experiences which are unique and peculiar to us as individual subjects" (Hall 1997 p. 219).



I do not want to convey the impression that Richard Jenkins and Stuart Hall think essentially along the same lines about identity and identity formation. Although there

are significant points of convergence in their approaches, there are also some important differences. Thus, where Richard Jenkins in *Social Identity* (1996) sets out to develop his own theory along the lines laid down by the work of especially G. H. Mead, E. Goffman and F. Barth, Stuart Hall has in *The Question of Cultural Identity* (1992) set himself the task of moving beyond a symbolic interactionist understanding of identity to a more postmodern and de-centered conception. Such a postmodern and de-centred understanding of identity is neatly conveyed by the illustration that has been placed on the cover of *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996).

However, if one sets out to compare Hobsbawm's position with that of Hall or that of Jenkins, it soon will become manifest that they are standing on different sides of the paradigm shift within the human and social sciences which is known as the 'cultural turn'.<sup>iv</sup> Hall and Jenkins assign much more analytic significance and explanatory weight to culture in their analyses of identity than Hobsbawm does. Where Hall and Jenkins see culture as something that is constitutive of and structuring social life, Hobsbawm sees it more like a dependent variable, as something that it is determined by something else. Thus, if I were to identity what has been the key issue necessitating a radical re-shuffling of social theory and placing the concept of 'identity' at its very centre, I would point to the re-thinking of the place of culture in social theory that has been gaining more and more momentum over the past decades. It is this re-shuffling that is now being referred to as 'the cultural turn', and in *The Centrality of Culture: Notes on the Cultural Revolution in Our Time* (1997) Hall tries to sum it up in the following way:

"The phrase 'culture's centrality' (...) signals the way in which culture creeps into every nook and crevice of contemporary social life, creating a proliferation of secondary environments, mediating everything. (...) It is almost impossible for the ordinary citizen to get anything like an accurate picture of the historical past without having it costumed, landscaped and 'themed' into the 'culture of heritage'. (...) Meanwhile, culture reaches deep into the mechanics of identity formation itself. (...) This interior probe is matched, externally, by the proliferation of instruments of surveillance (from cameras and monitors to consumer surveys and credit checks) (...). Amidst all the talk about 'deregulation' there has been a sophistication and intensification of the means of regulation and surveillance: what some are beginning to call 'governing by culture'. In these many different ways we have come to recognise that 'culture' is no soft option. It can no longer be studied as something unimportant, secondary or dependent variable in what makes the modern world move and shake, but has to be seen as something primary and constitutive, determining its shape and character as well as its inner life" (Hall 1997 p. 215).

#### Identity as lived history

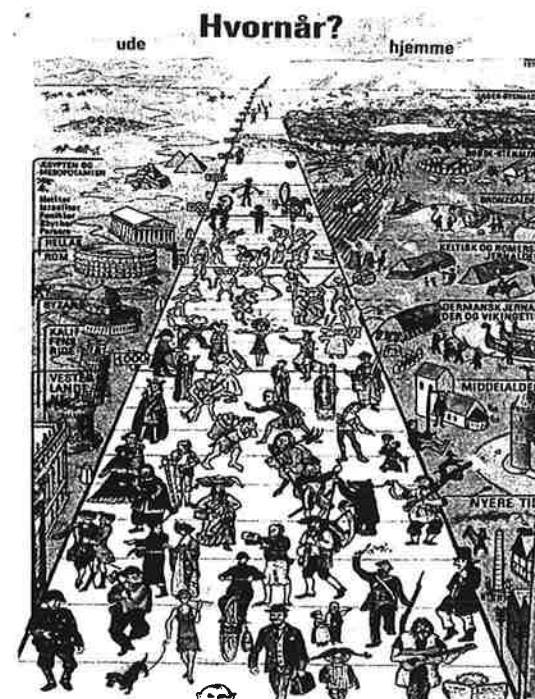
Some differences in the understanding of how history is related to identity politics may be traced back to a difference in the understanding of what human identity is and how it is formed, others seem to be due to different understandings of what is meant by history. Thus, if one begins to look more closely at how Hobsbawm employs the term 'history' in *The new threat to history* (1996), it soon becomes evident what his main concern is.

"Make no mistake about it. History is not ancestral memory or collective tradition. It is what people learned from priests, schoolmasters, the writers of history books, and the compilers of magazine articles and television programmes" (Hobsbawm 1996b p. 8).<sup>v</sup>

In his reflections on history and identity politics Hobsbawm is arguing on the basis of a distinction between memory or tradition on the one hand and history on the other, and in this context history refers to the different professionalized forms of history telling or history writing. Hobsbawm assigns great social significance to this kind of history - it is thus said to be responsible for the framing and spread of the new identity politics: "Myths and inventions are essential to the politics of identity (...) [and] the people who formulate those myths and inventions are educated people, schoolteachers lay and clerical, professors (...), journalists, television and radio producers". It therefore appears to be straightforward and consistent when Hobsbawm through his own writings sets out to counteract the present upsurge of identity politics by trying to persuade professional history tellers to keep clear of all forms of identity politics. They should do so - says Hobsbawm - by showing "a responsibility to the historical facts in general and for criticising the political-ideological abuse of history in particular".

Yet, it is possible to detect an unresolved paradox in Hobsbawm's thinking about the use of history in society at large. He appears on the one hand to think that ordinary people have given in to "the passions of identity politics" and have happily swallowed those "myths and inventions" with which some groups of educated people have provided them. But if his own attempt to combat the spread of identity politics is going to have any chance of succeeding, he also has to assume that the same ordinary people will be willing to listen to and accept the more enlightened approach of educated people like Hobsbawm. He does not however give any plausible explanation of why ordinary people should be prone to do one thing the one moment and then at the next would want to do the very opposite.

When Hobsbawm refers to history in his reflections on the perils of identity politics, he is thinking of history as something told by professionals. The conception employed by professionals is sometimes in a Danish setting called 'the Skalk approach to history'. Skalk is a very successful archaeological and historical journal written by professionals for a broad and popular audience, and its trademark or logo is a rather neat overview of Danish history. This logo epitomises in my view the way in which many professionals approach and think about history. History is defined as the past, as something, which the history researcher and history teller is able to stand outside and survey - as it were - from a bird's eye perspective. I am bringing this up here because such a conception is very much at variance with the concept of history, which is being employed when one is working with the formation of identities.



When one sets out to understand and explain how human identities are formed and function, it is not history as told by professionals, but history as lived that is the more basic conception. History in this sense is not a realm that one can stand outside of and survey from a position beyond that realm. Rather, history is more like something of which one is a part, it is the space in which one so to speak lives one's life. It is more like the air that one is breathing or the stream that one is swimming in, and it is also about using the past in order to be able to act and function in the present. It is moreover such a conception of history which is at stake when one speaks of humans as historical beings, and to be a historical being means precisely that part of one's nature is culture. Culture is something, which is intrinsically historical, and it therefore implies that people with different sets of historical experiences become different: they will act and feel, think and speak in ways that are perceptably different. Such difference may under specific circumstances be overcome, but it will normally require the development of some set of common experiences and shared understanding as well as some form of

common language. Culture in this sense is something that is central to and constitutive of human life and society.

It is moreover such a conception of history that forms the base of the available theories of historical consciousness. One may speak of historical consciousness, when people link their interpretations of the past not only to their understanding of the present but also to the forming of their expectations with regard to the future. Or to put it somewhat differently, a theory of historical consciousness seeks to generate insight into a basic and recurrent pattern in human life, namely that the past as well as the future are recurrently present and functioning in the present: the past is present as memory, the future as expectation. When talking about historical consciousness it is important to note that the term 'history' is no longer used as a synonym for the past, rather it is being used to describe the socio-cultural time processes in which humans live their lives, and such an understanding of history thus encompasses the past, present and future.

Richard Jenkins does not employ the term 'historical consciousness' or any of its more obvious synonyms in his book on *Social Identity* (1996), yet he is certainly referring to the same set of socio-cultural processes, when he writes:

"The centrality of time and space as resources for the social construction of identity. (...) Time is bound up with space in one's experience of self and other. Space makes no sense outside time. Time is important in processes of identification because of the continuity which, even if only logically, is entailed in a claim to, or attribution of, identity. Social continuity necessitates the positing of a meaningful past. Social identities are in themselves one foundation upon which order and predictability in the social world are based. The past is an important resource upon which to draw in interpreting the here-and-now and in forecasting the future. Individually, 'the past' is memory; collectively, it is history. Neither, however, are 'real': both are fundamentally constructs and both are important facets of identity" (Jenkins 1996 p. 27-28).

In *Social Identity* Jenkins does not attempt to develop the idea of "the past as an important resource" in any detail, but it is a theme that has been taken up by others working in the field of identity studies. If the identities of a person or group are to function in everyday life, it presupposes - as Jenkins rightly points out - "the positing of a meaningful past", and it has therefore become more and more common to see narrative as an integral part of the formation of identities. The background for this development has been a shift in the prevailing understanding of what narrativity is. Whereas scholars formerly tended to see narrative as a literary mode of representation only, the emphasis has shifted towards also conceiving narrativity as a key concept within social ontology. Narrative is therefore now assigned a dual role: it is seen as a category of lived experience and as a means of representing a lived life. Thus, it implies that identity as lived history should also be understood as being structured by stories.

Ruth Finnegan's *'Storying the self': Personal narratives and identity* (1997) is one of the many texts which attempts to develop a more narrative approach to the study of identity, and it is based on the view that human beings are - as she puts it - "story-telling animals". Such a concept not only implies that the telling of stories is a basic feature of human life, it goes a crucial step further by asserting that one should work on

the base of "a model of the self as 'storied' and of culture as both moulded and moulding through the personal stories of individuals". When Finnegan uses the term 'story', it means (i) that a temporal/sequential framework is being used, (ii) that there is an intelligible plot that makes sense to both the teller and the audience and (iii) that the story is constructed in accordance with a set of cultural conventions about form and content. But Finnegan wants to do more than develop a set of concepts with which to generate insight into the narrative character of identity, she has also made an ethnographic study of the themes and variations, the plots and structures to be found in a series of everyday narratives from Milton Keynes in England.<sup>vi</sup>

Margaret Somers is another scholar who has sought to develop a narrative approach of the study of identity; her aim however is more far reaching than that of Finnegan. Thus, in *The narrative constitution of identity* (1994) she has set herself the task of linking the concepts of 'narrative' and 'identity' together in order "to generate a historically constituted approach to theories of social action, agency, and identity", and this is done by trying to work out the theoretical implications of those conceptions of the narrative which David Carr and Charles Taylor have put forward in *Time, Narrative, and History* (1986) and *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989) respectively. Somers wants to reframe our understanding of narrativity by distinguishing between four of its key dimensions: (i) an ontological, (ii) a public, (iii) a meta, and (iv) a conceptual narrativity, and she bases this attempt at historicizing the study of human identity on the following research findings:

"scholars are postulating (...) that social life is itself storied and that the narrative is an ontological condition of social life. Their research is showing that stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that 'experience' is constituted through narratives; that people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives; and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not in others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives" (Somers 1994 p. 613-14).

The narrative approach to identity has become more and more favoured by scholars in the course of the 1990s, but it does not mean that there has been established a broad theoretical consensus within this field of study. One point where there is a significant divergence of opinion concerns the alternatives hinted at in the following formulation of Somers: "people construct identities (...) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories". Whereas there are few who would want to wholly exclude either of the sketched alternatives, there are significant differences as regards where to place the point of emphasis.

Stuart Hall and Margaret Somers both stress that people in the main find themselves 'being located' in sets of emplotted stories not of their own making, and they therefore think that people have little scope to shape those stories through which they live their lives. Although David Carr agrees with Hall and Somers that we should give up "any pretensions we might have to anything like being the authors of our own lives", he



wants to stress more than they do that people are "not entirely without resources" and that some of their projects do "occasionally achieve success". Like the other three, Ruth Finnegan stresses the importance of "the store of cultural resources on which personal narrators [can] draw in formulating their personal self-narrations", but she also makes a lot out of the fact that the personal narratives from Milton Keynes that she has been studying "so clearly project a theoretical model which, in contrast to many traditional sociological accounts, emphasises the significance of the self-conscious, creative self".

What are the implications of the narrative approach for the present discussion of how history is related to identity politics? Such an approach points in a different direction than the one found in Hobsbawm's reflections. His main concern has been that of developing a critical stance or position: he has set out to combat identity politics by urging professional history writers to criticise and thereby weaken what he terms "the political-ideological abuse of history". But if it is true - as the narrative approach suggests - that the identity of persons and groups is storied in the sense of being continuously structured and re-structured by emplotted stories, then it does not make a lot of sense if professional historians were only to enter the field of identity politics in order to criticise and deconstruct available public narratives.

I would like to make it quite clear that I am not hereby suggesting that the critical task of academic history should be ruled out of court. Among its tasks is certainly the one of being a critical and reflective enterprise: it must continuously discuss and assess existing public narratives in light of available evidence and research. Yet, it might still be pertinent to raise the question: is academic history also to perform a more constructive role within the field of identity politics? Hobsbawm does not confront this question directly, but since he tends to see identity politics only as a deplorable kind of business, the thrust of his thinking would tend towards answering such a question with a clear-cut no. My own answer is a different one.

If the identities of persons and groups are structured to a significant extent by emplotted stories, then people will not in practice be in the situation of having to choose whether or not they would want to employ emplotted stories in their lives. If it is true - as Somers and others have been asserting - that "social life is itself storied", then the use of narratives is to be considered a 'must': a condition of social survival. The scope of choice that people in fact have will then consist in either taking over and adapting some of the available public narratives or alternatively trying to develop and live out a new set of narratives. In other words, people will be living under a continuous pressure to consider which of the available public narratives are the more interesting and credible ones and which are the more precarious and problematic ones. Thus, the narrative approach implies that one main field of identity politics will concern the ongoing framing, discussion and revision of that stock of emplotted stories that are in circulation and use in a society at any particular point in time, and this must therefore also be one of the settings in which a discussion of the use of history in society should take place.

Such a framework may appear relevant moreover when one sets out to answer the question about how professional historians should think about and act in relation to identity politics. To try to dissociate academic history as much as possible from identity politics - as Hobsbawm wants to do - would mean depriving the history profession of

some of the socio-cultural significance that it might have in society at large. To limit the task of professional history to that of criticising and deconstructing available public narratives would only appear justified if the discipline in fact has given up all hope of being able to ground emplotted stories in existing research and evidence. But if that were the case, there might not be that much reason to maintain a history profession of any considerable size. To my mind, it would make a lot of more sense if professional historians would also see it as a part of their task to enter the field of identity politics in order to contribute constructively to the stock of emplotted stories that are in circulation in society and which people may use to structure the lives that they live and will be living.

To suggest such a thing is not to come along and offer academic history some wholly new task. There are numerous examples of professional historians having contributed to the framing of emplotted stories, which not only have structured people's understanding of the past but have also helped to shape the present and the future. I will here only mention a few of the more obvious ones. Thus, academic historians have over the years contributed to the development of those emplotted stories which helped shape the existing European nation states and the European Union as well as many of the different working class and women's movements. The task in question is therefore not a wholly new one, yet it is a task which makes it pertinent that there is an ongoing reflection on and debate about the normative base as well as the socio-cultural uses of academic history.

#### Identity politics, power and democracy

There are two notable lacunae in Hobsbawm's reflections on history and identity politics. He does not give much attention to the fact that identity over the past decades has increasingly become one of the key sites of political conflict, and that the actual formation of identities is therefore nowadays taking place within a field where there is both an intense and an ongoing power struggle. Nor does he give the notion of 'democracy' a focal position in his reflections, even though advocates of identity politics often have been arguing their case in terms of an attempt to develop and improve existing forms of democracy. These lacunae in Hobsbawm's reflections may be taken to indicate that the different ways of thinking about how history is to be related to identity politics also go back to differences in the understanding of politics. What is at issue here may be clarified by returning to a key formulation in Scott's aforementioned book on *Gender and the Politics of History* (1998):

"Experience is not seen as the objective circumstances that condition identity: identity is not an objectively determined sense of self defined by needs and interests; politics is not the collective coming to consciousness of similarly situated subjects. Rather, politics is the process by which plays of power and knowledge constitute identity and experience" (Scott 1988 p. 5).

That understanding of experience, identity and politics which Scott here is distancing herself from is the one that has been prevalent among adherents of traditional forms of Marxism, and one can - as noted earlier - still find remnants of a rather crude materialism in Hobsbawm's reflections on history and identity politics. However, it may be worthwhile forestalling a potential misunderstanding. Such a critique of traditional

Marxism is not motivated - as Scott's formulation also makes very evident - by a desire to downplay the role of power and conflict in relation to the study of identity. Rather, it would be more to the point to say that there has been a growing interest in trying to develop and refine the existing ways of thinking about politics and power.

One of the places in which the 'cultural turn' has been manifesting itself most clearly is in the study of power and its role in the formation of identities as well as in the production of knowledge. It is this shift that Hall is referring to when he speaks of "governing by culture", and it is this shift that Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley and Sherry B. Ortner survey and scrutinise in their book on *Culture/Power/History. A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (1994). Much research in this field has been taking the notion that 'the personal is political' as its point of departure and has tried to extend the analysis of power politics into all aspects of everyday life, the focus being on highlighting the ongoing negotiations and conflicts about the definitions of authority, knowledge and reality that constitute a recurrent and integral feature of everyday living. More and more scholars have likewise begun to base their research on the notion that the social world is in part a discursively constituted reality, and that power therefore must also in part be conceived as a cultural construct. Furthermore, the narrative approach to the formation of identities implies that one of the main fields of identity politics concerns the ongoing framing, discussion and revision of that stock of emplotted stories that are in circulation and use in a society at any particular point in time. Within such a framework one may attempt to determine what is to be understood by 'identity politics', the following is the definition which Dirks, Eley and Ortner are employing in *Culture/Power/History*:

"Identity politics builds on the notion that the cultural (read racial, gender, ethnic, religious) categories provide both a source of oppression and a means of empowering groups and communities to contest that oppression" (Dirks 1994 p. 24).

Thus, it is worth noting that the 'cultural turn' not only has been promoting insight into how people may employ culture in order to control and govern other people, it has likewise focussed attention on how culture may be used to further people's ability to shape and structure their own lives. One of the key notions when considering the relation of history to identity politics is the Gramscian idea that insight into the ways in which people's personal and collective identities have been formed may be used to enhance their capacity for self-determination. It is such an idea that constitutes the core of the notion of empowerment. But as soon as one starts to link power to the production of knowledge, it of course also has implications for the way in which one will be thinking about the writing of history, and it then soon becomes very apparent indeed why the whole question of how to understand the relationship of history to identity politics is a very intricate one.

"We are learning that if all culture is political, it is accordingly impossible to establish a neutral ground for culture that would itself be exempt from the struggles, claims, contests, and chaos of the political world" (Dirks 1994 p. 25).

If social reality is understood along the lines outlined here, it not only makes sense to speak of, for instance, the gendered nature of power, it also follows that human actions

will never constitute a 'power-neutral' activity, nor can there be any such thing as 'power-free' zones in human societies. If social reality is conceived in this way, it implies that people are continuously involved in some form of power politics, whether they want to be or not. The way in which they are involved may vary from person to person and from group to group, but the being involved in power politics is not an option, it is rather seen as an inescapable condition of living. This would of course also be the case when it comes to the ongoing making and re-making of identities. Thus, on the basis of such an understanding of the social world it will not be possible in practice to opt out of the deplorable business of identity politics, such as Hobsbawm would want to do. If one as a historian concerns oneself with issues of relevance for the formation of the identity of other people, one might as well openly acknowledge that one, for better or worse, has got oneself involved in the business of identity politics.

I find it more realistic and to the point to say that the study, writing and teaching of history can never in practice exempt itself from "the struggles, claims, contests, and chaos of the political world" than to assume that these scholarly activities somehow should be operating in a 'power-free' zone. But if that be the case, it also follows that the people who are engaged in studying, writing and teaching history might as well openly concede that they are partaking in ongoing power struggles, and that it therefore might be fitting if they were to set out to clarify the normative base as well as the political functions of their work. For instance, they would have to start considering the question of whom they want to support and empower through their history writing and to whom and what they are opposed. Thus, the question of how to understand the relationship of history to identity politics has not only added a further item to an existing scholarly agenda, it will - as I see it - oblige academic historians to make their thinking on power and politics, values and norms known to themselves and to their readers.

What I am suggesting here is an amendment to that system of guidelines that shape the ongoing work of the history profession.<sup>vii</sup> When academic historians set out to write history, they normally feel obliged to clarify the questions that they are attempting to answer, to survey other research of relevance for the chosen field of study, to indicate the principles concerning the selection of sources that are employed in the attempt to answer the questions posed, to reflect on the concepts that are used to organise the research findings, and so on. Through their history writing academic historians will be more or less wittingly involving themselves in the identity politics of their day, and I am therefore suggesting that it would be fitting if they also felt obliged to discuss and clarify the political and normative aspects of their history writing. If they were to become more open and clear about this side of their work, it would also shed some further light on what constitutes the base and core of the emplotted stories that they are writing.

Thus, it should be noted that at no stage have I been objecting to the fact that Eric Hobsbawm over the years has used his history writing to denounce capitalism and try to further a socialist alternative. Rather, I consider it one of Hobsbawm's great qualities that he has never tried to hide his political commitments but has actually tried to link them to his ongoing professional work as an historian. It is for other reasons that I have been disagreeing with him. My main objections are twofold.

- Carr, David (1986): *Time, Narrative, and History*
- Connolly, William E. (1991): *Identity/Difference. Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*
- Dirks, Nicholas B. et al. (1994): *Culture/Power/History. A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*
- Finnegan, Ruth (1997): 'Storying the Self': *Personal Narratives and Identity* in MacKay (1997)
- Finnegan, Ruth (1998): *Tales of the City. A Study of Narrative and Urban Life*
- Hall, Stuart et al. (ed.): *New Times. The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*
- Hall, Stuart et al. (ed.) (1992): *Modernity and its Futures*
- Hall, Stuart (1992): *The Question of Cultural Identity* in Hall (1992)
- Hall, Stuart et al. (ed.) (1996): *Questions of Cultural Identity*
- Hall, Stuart (1997): *The Centrality of Culture: Notes on the Cultural Revolution of Our Time* in Thompson (1997)
- Held, David (1992): *Liberalism, Marxism and Democracy* in Hall (1992)
- Hetherington, Kevin (1998): *Expressions of Identity. Space, performance, Politics*
- Hobsbawm, Eric (1971): *From Social History to History of Society* in Daedalus 100
- Hobsbawm, Eric (1994): *The Historian between the Quest for the Universal and the Quest for Identity* in Bedarida (1994)
- Hobsbawm, Eric (1996a): *Identity Politics and the Left* in New Left Review 217
- Hobsbawm, Eric (1996b): *The new threat to history* in Brivati (1996)
- Hobsbawm, Eric (1997): *On History*
- Jenkins, Richard (1996): *Social Identity*
- Keith, Michael (ed.) (1993): *Place and the Politics of Identity*
- MacKay, Hugh (ed.) (1997): *Consumption and Everyday Life*
- Nicolson, Linda et al. (ed.): *Social Postmodernism. Beyond identity politics*
- Scott, Joan W. (1988): *Gender and the Politics of History*
- Shane, Phelan (1989): *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community*
- Silverman, Hugh J. et al. (ed.) (1985): *Hermeneutics & Deconstruction*
- Somers, Margaret S. (1994): *The narrative constitution of identity. A relational and network approach* in Theory & Society 23
- Taylor, Charles (1989): *Sources of Self. The Making of Modern Identity*
- Thompson, Kenneth (ed.) (1997): *Media and Cultural Regulation*
- Weeks, Jeffrey (ed.) (1994): *The Lesser Evil and the Greater Good. The Theory and Politics of Social Diversity*
- Williams, Raymond (1976/83): *Keywords. A vocabulary of culture and society*
- Østergård, Uffe (1998): *Europa. Identitet og identitetspolitik*

<sup>i</sup> The terms 'identity politics' and 'politics of identity' first seem to have cropped up in an Anglo-American setting and from there they seem to have found their way to other Western vocabularies. It appears to be the case with the Scandinavian languages as well as German. The first time that the term 'identitetspolitik' was employed in the title of a Danish book or article was in conjunction with Uffe Østergård's study 'Europa. Identitet og identitetspolitik' (1998). However, in Danish as well as in German the term 'historiepolitik' / 'Geschichtspolitik' (i.e. a politics of history) has long been in use.

<sup>ii</sup> I have found these references in Alcoff 1988.

<sup>iii</sup> This book is not to be confused with Stuart Hall's contribution on 'The Question of Cultural Identity' in 'Modernity and its Futures', a volume he edited and published together with David Held in 1992. In this latter

work the term 'identity politics' was only used once and was defined dismissively as "one identity per movement".

<sup>iv</sup> Although the two turns certainly are interrelated, the notion of a 'cultural turn' is not identical with what is often referred to as the 'linguistic turn'. For a concise outline of what is understood by the 'cultural turn' see Hall 1997.

<sup>v</sup> In his first intervention Hobsbawm also based his argument on a distinction between popular memory/tradition on the one hand and the professionalized form of history on the other - cf. Hobsbawm 1994.

<sup>vi</sup> Her analysis of these narratives is to be found in 'Tales of the City. A Study of Narrative and Urban Life', 1998.

<sup>vii</sup> I am not suggesting that there is professional consensus about this system of norms. I think that it would appear more accurate to say that there is an ongoing discussion and contest both about which of these norms are the more crucial ones, and about how these norms are to be interpreted and applied in practice.

## Historiedidaktikk i Norden 7

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Program for lærerutdanning (PLU)

NTNU

Låven, Dragvoll gård

7491 Trondheim

Telefon: +47 73 59 19 90

Telefaks: +47 73 59 10 12

<http://www.plu.ntnu.no>

## Forord

I september 1999 ble den 7. nordiske konferansen om historiedidaktikk holdt på Jægtvolden ved Trondheim, Norge. Vert for konferansen var Program for lærerutdanning ved Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet, NTNU, Trondheim.

Arrangørgruppen besto av følgende personer:

Sirkka Ahonen, Universitetet i Helsingfors

Rolf Grankvist, NTNU, Trondheim

Christer Karlegård, Lärarhögskolan i Malmö

Svein Lorentzen, NTNU, Trondheim

Vagn Oluf Nielsen, Danmarks Lærerhøjskole, København

Ola Svein Stugu, NTNU, Trondheim

Anette Köhlert, Danmarks Lærerhøjskole, København, var konferansens sekretær

Konferansen mottok økonomisk støtte fra:

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Statens lærerkurs (Norge)

Konferansen var den 7. i rekken av nordiske, historiedidaktiske konferanser, siden den første ble avholdt i Kungälv i Sverige i 1982. Det ble ved avslutningen av konferansen besluttet å arrangere den 8. nordiske historiedidaktiske konferanse på Island i 2002.