demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
Ethnic and Racial Identities in a Changing South Africa: The Limits of Social Science Explanation*

DAVID HOWARTH
University of Essex


The rise of multi-culturalism, the ‘politics of cultural recognition’, and the explosion of ethno-nationalist conflicts in various parts of the world highlights the growing importance of political identity today. These phenomena pose at least two demanding sets of theoretical questions. On an explanatory level, they raise concerns about the empirical investigation of political identities. For example, how are we to conceptualize the relationship between political identities, on the one hand, and objective material interests, class politics and political subjectivity on the other? Or, more specifically, as a number of contemporary historians have asked, why is it that the mobilization of national, ethnic and racial identities produces such visceral and durable levels of affect, seldom matched when groups identify simply as workers, women or citizens? At the normative level, by contrast, identity politics has important repercussions for our understandings of democracy, social justice, redistribution, rights and social order. Issues raised in

* I would like to thank Jason Glynos, Steven Griggs and Aletta Norval for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

1. For a picture of the different aspects of identity politics, see J. Tully, Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity (Cambridge, 1995), 1-4.
this regard include the legitimacy of minority and group rights, demands for the recognition of difference, rights to toleration, and the precise role of inter-cultural dialogue in resolving the disputes raised in its name. In short, it might forcefully be argued that the phenomenon of identity and its theorization has acquired a paradigmatic resonance, which haunts a good deal of work in the humanities and social sciences.

What can an investigation of contemporary South African politics contribute to our understanding of these issues? There is a prima facie case for thinking it might be considerable. After all, South Africa has undergone the profound transition from a system of state imposed ethnic and racial identities – the apartheid political imaginary with its fantasy of pure and homogenized group difference – to a non-racial, multi-cultural democracy, famously dubbed the ‘Rainbow Nation’. It is in this spirit of anticipation that I examine Courtney Jung’s recent book Then I was Black. How much does it contribute to our understanding of this momentous social transformation and, consequently, for the wider issues raised by the advent of identity politics? At first glance, the book seems just to be concerned with the changing political identities of Afrikaners, Coloureds and Zulus in South Africa between 1980 and 1995. Closer inspection reveals that Jung uses her empirical research to address a wider range of issues in contemporary social science and political theory. These include the rise of identity politics, the characteristics of so-called ‘divided societies’, the limits of institutional design as a means of ameliorating ethnic conflict, the legitimacy of newly democratizing states, and the implications of identity politics for democratic theory. The book also raises central questions about the role of social science concepts and models, especially ideas about social constructionism, discourse analysis, and the ‘new institutionalism’ in describing and explaining complex historical processes.

This essay evaluates Jung’s account of political identities in transition with an eye to these broader issues. I begin with a synopsis of its main arguments and propositions, after which I assess her critiques of the divided society thesis and the role of constitutional engineering. I then evaluate her analyses of changing ethnic and racial identities in South Africa, before concluding with an examination of her general approach to the study of political identities. I will show that while many of Jung’s substantive conclusions about changing identities are illuminating, and while she is generally successful in challenging the mainstream social science framing of identity politics in South Africa, her account falls short on empirical,

theoretical and methodological grounds. Empirically, her concern with the changing political identities of Afrikaners, Coloureds and Zulus misses out the crucial structural transition from an apartheid to post-apartheid social imaginary, especially the construction of a South African political identity.\(^5\) On a theoretical level her explanatory logics do not provide the conceptual resources for understanding the dialectics of structure and agency, the processes of identity and identification, and the grip of ethnic, racial and national identities. I also argue that Jung's approach is split between a positivist methodology aiming to provide general causal explanations of phenomena, and a constructivism which eschews the scientficity of mainstream social science because of its sensitivity to the historical specificity and particularity of identity formation. Instead, I employ a materialist conception of discourse, which is informed by post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theory, to disclose an alternative set of research questions, and to point to ways in which they might be substantively answered.\(^6\)

**Changing Political Identities in South Africa**

*Then I was Black* is predicated on the idea that identities are multiple and malleable. Most importantly, they are understood as political constructs, whose character is relative to changing historical contexts. Distinguishing political identities from identities in other spheres, whether they be personal, social, spiritual, or economic, Jung argues that the former consists of 'that portion of identity which emerges as salient in the organized struggle for control over the allocation of resources and power residing in the state' (p. 19).\(^7\) This premise enables her to offer a novel set of interpretations about the changing nature of ethnic and racialized identities in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, in which she seeks to weaken the distinction between what she calls class and ideological identities on the one hand, and ethnic and racial identities on the other (pp. 255-7, 262). By viewing both sets as constructed and mobilized for political purposes, Jung disputes the presumed primordiality and essentialism of ethnic and racial identities, as well as the *sui generis* character of 'deeply divided societies' such as South Africa (which is often presented as one of its paradigm cases). She also contests the necessity of constitutional and institutional fixes to 'deep division', whether it be Arend Lijphart's 'consociational democracy' or Donald

---


Horowitz’s ‘alternative vote’ electoral system, which are designed to contain ascriptive ethnic and racial identities.8

In substantiating her claims, Jung treats the emergence and ‘resonance’ of identities as her dependent variable, and then proposes a theoretical model comprising five independent variables – political institutions, mobilizing discourse, material conditions, available ideology and organization (p. 25) – to explain it. She further divides her independent variables into ‘proximate’ and ‘conditioning’ factors, in which the former operate ‘from the top down and are deliberately involved in the manipulation and mobilization of identities for political purposes’, while the latter ‘provide incentives’ for social action and ‘frame the cognition of those who are mobilized’ (p. 236). ‘Political institutions’ and ‘mobilizing discourse’ constitute the proximate factors, while ‘material conditions’, ‘available ideology’ and ‘organization’ form the conditioning variables. She concludes her study by arguing that conditioning variables ‘create a social grid that political entrepreneurs, as well as their potential constituents, operate within’, and that ‘the success or failure of elite mobilization efforts depends largely on the composition of this social grid’ (pp. 244-5, my emphasis).

To demonstrate these conclusions empirically, Jung presents a comparative analysis of six case studies, which traces ‘the partial transformation of the political content and boundaries of Zulu, Afrikaner and Coloured identities in two periods over the course of South Africa’s transition from apartheid’ (p. 38). Her account of changing Zulu identity may be taken as a representative example. She begins by claiming that whereas ‘ethnicity was not available as a source of political identification in the 1970s’, by the 1980s for both Inkatha and United Democratic Front (UDF) supporters alike ‘Zulu identity had political resonance, and a particular political significance’, especially among rural inhabitants of KwaZulu and recent migrants to the city whose primary ties remained to the rural areas’ (p. 73). Indeed, this politicized ethnic identity became ‘the dominant and dividing cleavage of politics in Natal’ (p. 247). However, although widespread violence between UDF/African National Congress (ANC) and Inkatha supporters continued through the 1994 elections, thereby reinforcing the cleavage patterns of the 1980s, the post-election period saw a toning down of Zulu rhetoric as the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) sought to build a wider support base and establish national unity. By the 1999 election, moreover, the salience of Zulu political identity was even weaker as KwaZulu-Natal exhibited the largest percentage of undecided

voters in the country (p. 248). The curtailment of violence in the region made possible an even more indeterminate political situation, and undermined the dominant identity cleavage.

Jung explains these developments by invoking her various independent variables. She argues that the mobilization of Zulu identity by Inkatha's political entrepreneurs represented a response to the movement's 'exclusion' from the ANC in the 1970s, its retreat to the party's 'institutional power base' (the KwaZulu homeland), and its reliance on the traditional organizational networks within which the movement was embedded (p. 73). The resonance of this interpellation amongst KwaZulu's rural inhabitants and recent urban migrants is explained by the fact that this constituency 'retained primary connections to a rural area' and its attendant 'social system', was not exposed and 'politicized in the Charterist tradition', and competed against permanent township dwellers for access to resources (p. 74). In the 1990s, by contrast, the new political system radically altered the parameters of the political game. The integration of the KwaZulu homeland into a unified and democratic South Africa led the IFP to broaden its appeal, while the ANC did not, unlike the UDF, present itself as anti-Zulu, thereby undercutting the IFP's capacity to paint the ANC in this way (p. 109). Even more significantly, Jung discerns a decreasing resonance of Zuluness in the 'lived experience' of those once in its grip. By correlating organizational networks and levels of violence, she argues that the increase in violence during the 1980s and early 1990s resulted in tighter organizational control, while the decrease in violence during the 1990s made the organizational patterns more fluid (p. 110). In addition, changes in the material conditions of urban settlements saw class cleavages overtake primogeniture as the relevant social division, with a concomitant decline in the efficacy of politicized ethnicity. Finally, the availability of Zulu identity as a means of political mobilization declined as Zuluness became disaggregated into its private and public aspects. In short, as she puts it, 'the interaction of political institutions, mobilising discourse, available ideology, organisational networks and material conditions has undermined the political salience of Zulu identity in the immediate postapartheid era' (p. 111).

**Divided Societies and Institutional Design**

My brief overview of *Then I was Black* gives some idea of its scope and ambition. Undoubtedly, one of the strengths of the book centres on its challenge to widely held social science assumptions about deeply divided societies, institutional engineering, and the nature of political identity. Jung provides a useful antidote to the simplifying assumptions and positivistic inclination of (largely American inspired and driven) social science explanations of societal division and political conflict. With their origins in theories of the plural society, approaches such as
those propounded by Arend Lijphart and Donald Horowitz share what might be deemed 'elective complicities' with certain apartheid assumptions about the naturalness and homogeneity of group identity, as well as the incommensurability of ethnic and racial difference. As Jung correctly notes, Lijphart and Horowitz both assume that (allegedly) ascriptive identities such as race, ethnicity, language and religion are the central problems to be addressed in divided societies, and they are thus concerned to design political institutions, such as electoral systems or federal structures, which can undermine the incentives that political entrepreneurs have in mobilizing identities for their own interests, but which can militate against the common interests of social stability and political peace.

Jung's critique is twofold. On the one hand, she argues that the measures proposed by Lijphart and Horowitz are at best 'largely contingent' solutions, which are as likely to be ineffectual or to engender other 'conflictual cleavages', as to achieve the attenuating objectives they envisage (p. 240). On the other hand, Jung criticizes the way in which Lijphart and Horowitz account for the role of identities in politics. She objects to the exceptional status attributed to ethnic and racial identities, as against what she calls class or ideological identities, and to the way in which divided society theorists explain the resonance of identity by stressing proximate rather than conditioning variables. By inferring from her account of South African history that conditioning variables are the major determinants of ideological grip, she downplays the potentially ameliorating effects of institutional fixes, as they do not have the causal weight attributed to


11. For example, Horowitz advocates the alternative vote electoral system – a form of majoritarianism in which candidates must secure more than half the votes in a constituency to win an outright majority, and if they do not then consideration must be taken of voters' first, second, and even third preferences. Jung argues that this procedure will only work if it can 'encourage a moderate party to cast a wide net and to try and get as many votes as possible from as many groups as exist', and it would only have the desired effect 'if there were two and only two ethnic groups and two and only two political parties' (p. 240). She then goes on to outline alternative scenarios – if there are more than two ethnic groups and more than two ethnic political parties for instance – in which the AV system can simply displace ethnic conflict to other parts of the political system, such as the formation of coalitions of ethnically based parties, or into extra-parliamentary forms of political competition (pp. 241-2). Indeed, these measures could exacerbate ethnic cleavages as they force political elites to compete for the same pool of voters in ethnic or racial terms.
them by constitutional engineers. In short, she challenges the widely held assumption that ‘states made race’\textsuperscript{12} by stressing ‘the fluid, indeterminate, and variable salience of identities’, as well as the social structures that constrain the mobilization of race and ethnicity by political entrepreneurs (p. 242).

Instead, Jung argues that in a democratic system in which ‘political institutions generate incentives for political elites to mobilize majorities’, and given that ‘majorities may be constituted in different ways’, electoral mechanisms encompass incentives for the mobilization of multiple identities. The author’s empirical evidence suggests to her that South Africa’s new ‘semifederalist’ political system, alongside its ‘list system proportional representation with universal suffrage’ (p. 243) does indeed generate multiple incentives for the mobilization of political identity, and she offers three reasons why this is the case. Firstly, the various parties that contested the elections were each endowed with previously existing ideological traditions and identities, and this constrained their ability to re-invent themselves. Secondly, the post-apartheid political institutions are sufficiently flexible and indeterminate ‘to include incentives for political elites to generate constituencies around a variety of symbols.’ Finally, political leaders are strongly constrained by the range of conditioning factors she isolates, which partly shape the degree to which they are successful (p. 244). Hence, she concludes that although ‘the greatest danger apparently facing South African democracy is the possibility that the ANC majority will atrophy into a one-party state’, the existence of multiple political identities, coupled with the shifting array of variables that condition their resonance, means that South African politics ‘should remain fluid enough to support the institutionalized uncertainty democracy requires’ (p. 251).

Many of Jung’s arguments about the ‘divided society’ thesis and institutional engineering are persuasive. One query that does arise, however, concerns the way that her conclusions are inferred from the South African case. While it is true that single case studies can form the basis for wider generalizations, it is necessary for their allegedly exemplary status to be justified.\textsuperscript{13} In this respect, Jung correctly vindicates her claims by arguing that the South African case is often taken as paradigmatic of the divided society thesis (p. 10). Nevertheless, her retrospective analyses and critiques take place at the end of a cycle of political protest and conflict going back at least to the Soweto rebellion in 1976, with all its attendant


\textsuperscript{13} In this regard, see B. Flyvberg, \textit{Making Social Science Matter} (Cambridge, 2000); A. Hirschman, ‘The Search for Paradigms as a Hindrance to Understanding’, \textit{World Politics}, 22, 3 (1970), 329-43.
ebbs and flows. By contrast, the ‘divided society thesis’ was asserted in an historical context when the prospects for change were not as obvious and advanced, or where they had seemingly stalled. Jung has in short chosen a case in which widespread social change was and is taking place; indeed, as the author herself notes, a country undergoing something approximating revolutionary change.

It is legitimate, therefore, to ask to what extent – or indeed whether – her underlying theoretical assumptions and substantive claims can tell us about other instances of seemingly intractable ethnic and racial conflict, such as those in Israel/Palestine, Northern Ireland, Kashmir, the former Yugoslavia or Indonesia to take a few random examples. Do these counterfactual instances problematize her claims about the political and contingent character of ethnic and racial identity? Is her model attentive to the conditions and processes by which ethnic and racial identities can come to be lived as merely political and contingent constructs alongside other politicizable features of social life? That is to say, without returning to the objectivism and essentialism of divided society arguments, and as the necessary flip-side of her model, she requires some way of accounting for the sedimentation and fixity of ethnic and racial identities, as well as their seemingly intractable natures. Such concerns would require an analysis of the peculiar grip of ethnic and racial identities, which brings us to the heart of Jung’s text: her conceptualisation and theorization of political identity.

16. In this respect, an approach that compares the grip of identities in more than one country might yield significantly different conclusions. (On occasion, Jung herself alludes to cases such as the former Yugoslavia and South Korea [p. 243]). Whatever the outcome, such comparative analysis would at least enable us to ‘test’ the conclusions reached in this single-country study. This would not have to take the form of a ‘large-statistical comparison’ of different countries, which in this author’s view would not take us very far in understanding the dynamics of identity formation and sedimentation. Instead, it might proceed along the lines of a comparative historical sociology, evident in the work of Theda Skocpol, Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan. See J.J. Linz and A. Stepan, Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: South America, and Post-Communist Europe (Baltimore: 1996); T. Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China (Cambridge, 1979); T. Skocpol and M. Somers, ‘The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry’, Comparative Studies in Society and History, 22 (1980), 174-97.
Political Identity and Identification

Jung’s account of political identity correctly stresses the plural, contingent and constructed character of political identities, and rightly draws a distinction between cultural and social identities, and political identities. This enables her to account for the fact that we may simultaneously have a number of identities, that these identities may or may not be politicized in different historical contexts, and that different sorts of political identity – racial, class, ethnic or ‘ideological’ – can all be mobilized for political purposes without necessarily having differential effects. Jung reinforces these theses by giving an example of an interviewee whose Zulu identity was intermittently political or cultural, or both, depending on the different historical conditions in which he was living (pp. 4-8). However, there are three ambiguities in her picture. She neglects the relational dimension of political identities; emphasizes identities at the expense of the process of identification; and, paradoxically, by emphasising the contingency and malleability of identities, she underplays the sedimentation and grip of identity. I shall examine each of these tensions in turn.

Relationalism versus Atomism

Jung presents political identities as discrete rather than relational phenomena. By contrast, a fully-fledged relational approach, as adumbrated in Saussure’s structural linguistics and then taken forward by post-structuralist theorists such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, holds that political identities (indeed all identities) are always marked by other identities, whose differences partly constitute them. In linguistic terms, for instance, the signifier ‘cat’ is distinguished by its contrast to other signifiers such as ‘hat’, ‘mat’, or ‘bat’, which forms the basis of Saussure’s famous claim that in language ‘there are only differences, and no positive terms’.17 This principle has been extended to the analysis of society and politics by Laclau and Mouffe, who conceive of ideological systems or discourses as structures of differential elements. However, they draw on so-called post-structuralist critics such as Derrida and Foucault to show the impossibility of a closed or complete system of elements. This leads them to insist that each system is itself divided from other systems, which partially fix its identity.18

ETHNIC AND RACIAL IDENTITIES

In itself, of course, this perspective is not a substitute for painstaking and careful empirical research into the emergence and constitution of political identities. It offers instead a theoretical grammar for understanding the ways in which the creation of equivalences or differences between differently positioned social agents leads to various forms of social division. This involves the discursive construction (or disarticulation) of social antagonisms – in crude terms, the creation (or dissolution) of ‘friend-enemy’ distinctions – which either simplify or complexify social space.\(^\text{19}\) For example, the constitution of a black identity by the Black Consciousness Movement in the early 1970s was achieved by its being differentiated from ‘white racism’, and other ethnic identifications such as Indian, Coloured, Zulu, African, and so forth. The practice of making the latter set of identities equivalent to one another – or overdetermined\(^\text{20}\) – was realized by creating a black/non-black political frontier in which blackness proved to be the common denominator linking ethnic and racial differences together.\(^\text{21}\) One of the chief aims of the movement was to divide social space into two camps, so as to counter the apartheid project’s desire to complexify social space by institutionalizing ethnic and racial difference.

Jung’s inattention to these important dynamics of identity formation has important repercussions for the stories she tells. Take for instance her account of changing Coloured identity. Jung suggests that Coloured politics in the 1980s – dominated as she claims by the Labour Party and the UDF – was united in its acceptance of a black, rather than coloured, political identity; during the 1990s, by contrast, this unified black identity was shattered and no clear-cut ethnic or racial political identity emerged. Now while it is true that both the LP and the UDF were marked in their different ways by their relationship to Black Consciousness, and many Coloured people and groups problematized ‘colouredness’ by using the prefix ‘so-called’, it is simply wrong to assert that black identity was a central component of the UDF’s discourse. On the contrary, the UDF had explicitly...

19. The friend-enemy distinction was famously used by Carl Schmitt to characterize his definition of ‘the political’. See C. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago, 1996). For a further discussion of the logics of equivalence and difference, see Howarth, *Discourse*, 106-7.

20. A term that Jung uses in a systematically misleading way. At times, it denotes the domination of one identity over another (p. 10), while at other times it suggests the overlaying of cultural and political meaning (p. 111). A radicalized version of the latter usage corresponds more closely to the original Freudian term, which was then developed by Louis Althusser to conceptualize the logics of displacement and condensation accompanying macro-social historical events such as the Russian Revolution. See L. Althusser, *For Marx* (London, 1969), 206.

opposed the exclusionary connotations of blackness and had endeavoured to articulate a non-racial, democratic and, most importantly, common South African identity.  

It is the latter element in particular – the UDF’s (and subsequently the ANC’s) discourse of a common South African citizenship for all – that provides the key for accounting for the apparently paradoxical fragmentation and flux in the meaning of Coloured political identity in the 1990s. Without a clear-cut common enemy in the form of the apartheid state – the erosion of political frontiers – and given the hegemonic appeal and security of a non-racial, democratic South Africa, Coloureds could choose political parties in keeping with their preferences and self-interests. In this context, it is not surprising that Coloured political identity has been mobilized in a variety of contradictory ways as politicians vie for their votes. In short, although Jung alludes to the way in which Coloured people identify themselves principally as South African citizens in attitude surveys and opinion polls, she is unable to explain this fact, and it thus remain largely implicit and undeveloped.

**Identity versus Identification**

A second aporia in Jung’s work concerns her conceptualization of the relationship between political identities and the process of identification, an issue that directly impinges upon her account of the relationship between social structures and political agency. Jung addresses the latter issue by endeavouring to deconstruct primordial and instrumental conceptions of political identity. She thus seeks to avoid conceiving identities as either primordial entities in which ‘identity precedes social interaction’ leaving ‘scant room ... for choice’ (p. 252), or as pure constructs mobilized by elites at their will, as this neglects the vitally important conditioning factors within which political entrepreneurs operate (pp. 244-5; see also p. 249). However, by sharply distinguishing between proximate and conditioning variables, and prioritizing the latter over the former, she runs the risk of reifying the division she seeks to overcome. She thus bifurcates structural and agency-centred factors, such that her explanation of identity formation and resonance is either too

22. There is some confusion about the way Jung uses the term ‘nonracialism’. In this regard, she distinguishes between ‘nonracialism’ and ‘multiracialism’, arguing that the former term was hegemonic in the UDF during the 1980s and effaced ethnic identities such as Coloured, Indian, White and so forth, whereas in the 1990s the ANC employed the latter term to recognize ethnic differences (pp. 211-3). However, while there may have been disputes about the precise role of Coloured identity in the UDF during the 1980s, it is evident that the movement was committed to recognizing ethnic differences within it. Indeed, the Natal Indian Congress and the Transvaal Indian Congress, as well as white organisations such as the National Union of South African Students, were all affiliated to the Front.
ETHNIC AND RACIAL IDENTITIES

structural or too voluntaristic. More pointedly, either political leaders employ mobilizing discourse instrumentally to construct identities so as to advance their projects, or the resonance of these appeals is ultimately determined by structural factors such as material conditions, available ideology and level of organization. What is required is a more dynamic model that enables us to account for the interweaving of structural and agency aspects both for the mobilization of discursive appeals and for their reception.

To do this, I think it is important to make a conceptual distinction between identity and the process of identification. As Lacanian theorists such as Slavoj Žižek argue, this presupposes a conception of the human subject as an empty place or void, which is nothing but its identifications with ideologies and discourses that 'cover over' or 'suture' its inherent lack, thus providing the subject with a temporary and illusory sense of identity.*

Laclau has developed this idea by arguing that dislocations of identity – caused for instance by changing relations of production or new forms of political organization – engender new forms of identification as subjects are compelled to identify with new discursive objects to 'fill in' their inherent lacks. This in turn means that social structures are themselves incomplete and internally contradictory entities, which in certain conditions disclose a range of possible courses of political action. In sum, these reflections make possible a dynamic conception of structure and agency in which agents are constrained by the structures that confer identity, but are 'freed' to act or decide in moments of crisis, when the ultimate contingency and undecidability of those structures becomes visible. Empirically, this suggests the following set of questions for historical research. What discourses become available as means of representation? How and why do these discourses come to be seen as credible means of representation? What actors are able to articulate these discourses in a hegemonic fashion?

Consider the Soweto uprisings in June 1976. While to some extent the events were made possible by the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) articulation of a radical black identity, an important effect of their 'resolution' – the BCM's suppression and the exiling of many of its supporters – dislocated black identity and opened-up space for new discourses to become available as points of identification. After a period of prolonged and intensive politico-ideological struggle in this crucial post-Soweto conjuncture, it was the language of democratic non-racialism – crystallized in the form of the UDF (and the ANC) in the 1980s

23. S. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London, 1989), 174-5. This lack is ontological, firstly, because we can only become subjects by identifying with a signifier that is external and alien to us, but it is precisely because this signifier is external and alien that it can never represent us adequately and, secondly, because the signifier with which we identify in the symbolic order is always incomplete – it is marked by an outside that always escapes it.

which emerged as the hegemonic anti-apartheid discourse, and it is this language which has come to form the basis of South Africa’s post-apartheid social imaginary. In a similar vein, if we turn to the emergence and construction of Zulu political identity, it was Buthelezi’s rebuff at the hands of the ANC in the late 1970s (and then later the independent trade unions and the UDF), as well as the failure of the Inkatha movement to insinuate itself as the internal wing of the ANC, that dislocated Buthelezi and his supporters, and saw Inkatha searching for other means of ideological representation. This new discursive object came to be the discourse of Zulu regionalism and ‘tribal populism’, which inter alia was to be an important precipitating factor in the conflict between Inkatha and the UDF/ANC in the 1980s and 1990s. These and other dislocatory events at the time saw Buthelezi abandoning his claim to represent the ‘real’ ANC, and resulted in his movement being pushed progressively toward accepting the Bantustan framework as its power base. It also led the movement to adopt a discourse that could interpellate supporters against the progressive non-racialism of the UDF, the independent trade unions and their allies.

The Grip of Identity

These thoughts enable us to problematize Jung’s overly agency-centred account by better conceptualizing what might be called the ‘supply side’ of identity formation. But what of the demand side? How, for instance, are we to analyse those addressed by Inkatha’s new Zulu nationalist appeals? How were its appeals disseminated, ‘taken up’ and ‘lived out’ by the subjects of the discourse? In contrast to approaches (such as Jung’s) that overplay the structural conditions of receptivity, this approach draws attention, firstly, to the dislocations experienced by the subjects of the discourse, secondly, to the hegemonic practices by which new subjects are interpellated and, finally, to the way subjects have the capacity to transform discourse through their identifications and practices.

Such a model of political action can provide the means to redescribe some of phenomena Jung analyses. Let us examine Jung’s account of the resonance of Afrikaner identity in the 1990s. Based on her analysis of electoral behaviour in the 1994 and 1999 general elections, Jung shows that there was a brief flourishing of


Afrikaner identity between 1992 and 1994, followed by its sharp decline. Her explanation centres on the breakdown of traditional organizational bases of the Afrikaner right wing, and the fact that the Afrikaner political project did ‘not fit the lived experience of the majority of middle- and upper-class Afrikaners’ (p. 165). What we have here are correlations between different sorts of phenomena – limited grip, on the one hand, and ‘lived experience’ and organization on the other – measured in terms of electoral behaviour. However, we do not get an adequate account of this limited resonance. Such an explanation ought surely to include the dislocatory effects of the failure of the apartheid social imaginary; an analysis of the hegemonic practices engaged in by organic intellectuals of the far right; the effects of other forces and projects seeking to win support amongst the Afrikaner constituency; and, importantly, the emergence and consolidation of a South African identity. The last factor is mentioned by Jung with respect to changes during the 1980s, when she argues that Afrikaner identity was all but replaced by a white South African identity, as the National Party (NP) sought to include English-speakers, thus making the identity all but ‘politically dormant’ (p. 112). However, the two historical contexts were very different. While in the 1980s an Afrikaner identity could more or less happily co-exist with a white South African identity, as there was an overdetermination between it and South Africanness, by the 1990s the latter connoted a non-racial, multi-cultural and democratic political identity deeply at odds with white domination. A political discourse analysis like this would go some way in offsetting the structuralist bias of Jung’s explanations.

Thus far, I have examined Jung’s explanation of the transient and constructed character of identity’s grip. However, her overemphasis on its contingency and malleability blinds her to its durability and sedimentation. In other words, while it is important to stress the strengths of her historicizing approach to allegedly primordial and essentially irrational identities such as those of race, ethnicity and nation, we need also to account for the ‘stickiness’ of certain political identities and their hardening in the face of threat and uncertainty. More precisely, her analyses beg questions as to why ethnic and national conflicts assume such an intense form; how and why they exercise such a powerful grip on political subjects; and why they have proved to be so durable and intractable in many different contexts.

There are two complementary ways of approaching this issue. A genealogical approach would investigate the historical reasons why racial and ethno-

27. Of course, there were important tensions in this relationship, manifest in various party political splits, but these tensions tended to be about the precise character and form of continued white domination, not its abandonment and replacement. See C. Charney, ‘Class Conflict and the National Party Split’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 10, 1 (1984), 269-82.
nationalist discourses have often supplanted more rationalistic ideologies such as class as the principal means of representing the identities and interests of dominated groups. Benedict Anderson, for example, has suggested that nationalism's 'imagined communities' provide basic answers to questions about 'death and immortality', answers previously given by the great world religions, and the same could probably be said about politicized ethnic and racial identities.

More recently, Steve Smith's illuminating historical analysis of workers' identities in Shanghai between 1895 and 1927 addresses the question as to why discourses of nationalism and ethnicity were able to grip so much more powerfully than discourses of class. Although he does not articulate a completely satisfying answer, he stresses the way in which particularistic attachments reinforced an emergent national identity in China, itself a function of 'the nation's long 'history of political and administrative unity' and 'her relatively greater cultural unity'.

Even more significantly, he highlights the construction of what he calls a 'class-inflected anti-imperialist discourse', as the best means of capturing the 'overdetermined' character of workers' identities in China at the time. Finally, although in a still too economistic fashion, Dan O'Meara has drawn attention to the overlaying of class, race and nation in the articulation of Afrikaner nationalism during the 1930s and 1940s, showing how its racist and politicized ethnic form could interpellate different and even contradictory social classes.

These somewhat disparate reflections can be further concretized by considering a parallel problem, whose fleeting traces are often registered, but never really addressed in Then I Was Black. It concerns the emergence and consolidation of a South African political identity. In other words, instead of just exploring the failure of ethnic and racial identities in post-apartheid South Africa, Jung might have problematized and then analysed the construction and resonance of a non-racial, democratic and South African political identity. The availability of this more universalistic political identity, which had the power to displace and transcend the politicization of more particularistic identities based on race, nation and ethnicity, has gone a considerable way in explaining the weakening hold of the identities she explores.

---

28. Michel Foucault has done most to extend the concept of genealogy into historical analysis. See Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', 76-100.
30. Smith, Like Cattle and Horses, 263.
31. Ibid., 10.
32. O'Meara, Volkskapitalisme, 11-7.
33. It is not within the remit of this article to examine this immense topic, but attention ought to be focused on at least four sets of critical political and discursive practice. These are, firstly, the centripetal forces of colonialism and imperialism, which forged a South African state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Secondly, the long-standing national-popular tradition...
Do these historicizing thoughts exhaust what can be said about the grip of identity, or can more be said at an ontological level?34 This essay answers in the affirmative. Indeed, the very project of a historicizing genealogy depends on a set of ontological assumptions and concepts with which to guide its operation.35 In this case, the genealogical investigation discloses the contingent processes by which ethnic and racial identities are constructed (or deconstructed), while an ontological inquiry seeks to explicate the structural logics and mechanisms that engender and sustain such identifications.

of political opposition, stretching back to the formation of the South African Native National Congress in 1912, and continued with its articulation of resonating national symbols such as the Freedom Charter in 1955. Thirdly, the various instances and phases of popular political protest directed against the discredited and illegitimate balkanizing logics of the apartheid regime, whether it be defiance campaigns of the Congress Alliance in the 1950s, the construction of a common black identity by the BCM in the late 1960s and 1970s, the construction of a discourse of non-racial class solidarity amongst all South African workers by the independent trade unions in the 1970s and 1980s, and especially the constitution of non-racial, democratic national-popular ideology by the UDF and the ANC in the 1980s and 1990s. Here, an important consideration are the critical debates that took place within the national democratic movement in the 1970s and 1980s, in which a certain national-popular consent was constructed beneath the differences over strategy and the goals of liberation. And, finally, the slow but sure emergence and dissemination of a national culture forged around a shared literary and artistic heritage, sporting practices and feats, the acceptance of a common lingua franca, and the existence of common religious traditions. When welded together by hegemonic political forces like the ANC, crystallized in founding events such as the first non-racial, democratic elections in 1994, and bolstered by practices such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which have to some extent contributed to the creation of a democratic ethos, these factors have more or less resulted in the construction of a common South African national identity with an attendant set of citizenship rights. For a discussion of the first factor, see A. Atmore and S. Marks, 'The Imperial Factor in South Africa in the Nineteenth Century', Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, 3, 1 (1974), 105-39. For a discussion of the third factor, see D. Howarth 'Populism or Popular Democracy? The UDF, Workerism and the Struggle for Radical Democracy in South Africa', in F. Panizza, ed., Rethinking Populism (London, 2002), as well as T. Lodge, All Here and Now: Black Politics in South Africa in the 1980s (London, 1981); Marx, The Lessons of Struggle. The concept of a democratic ethos is discussed in D. Owen, Nietzsche, Politics, and Modernity: A Critique of Liberal Reason (London, 1995).

34. Following Heidegger, I contrast the ontological with the ontical, in which the former refers to the implicit assumptions presupposed by any inquiry into specific sorts of phenomena and the latter to the specific sorts of phenomena themselves. For example, an ontical investigation in political science might concern itself with an analysis of electoral behaviour or different sorts of electoral system, while an ontological investigation would be concerned to explore what makes these phenomena political in the first place. Such an investigation thus involves reflection on the nature of 'the political' itself. See Howarth, Discourse, 112-3.

35. In other words, no matter how historicizing a particular account may be, it requires a set of concepts and categories to make its narrative possible. Of course, these concepts and categories are not necessarily fixed and exhaustive. Indeed, they may have a certain contingency built into their very natures. For an illuminating discussion of this issue, see E. Laclau, 'Identity and Hegemony', in J. Butler, E. Laclau and S. Žižek, Contingency, Hegemony, Universality (London, 2000), 53, 86-7, 191-5.
There are two connected ways in which such an ontological inquiry can be carried out. The first concentrates on the way in which ideologies that secure identity conceal lacks or structural dislocations. Returning to our discussion of the distinction between identity and identification, it will be recalled that post-structuralists such as Laclau and Žižek assume that there is a lack at the heart of any social structure (and by implication in any social subject). This lack of a signifier in the ‘symbolic order’ is covered over by a discourse which temporarily fixes meaning in a discursive field, thereby sustaining a given social order. In order for a discourse to perform this ‘filling function’ it must be built around what Laclau calls an ‘empty signifier’, that is, a signifier which is progressively emptied of determinate content, thus enabling it to speak to a range of identities and interests by promising a fullness absent in the existing structure. In times of social crisis, this lack in the symbolic order becomes visible, and new discourses vie to fill it by proposing mythical solutions to particular problems. If the proposed myth is able to ‘cover-over’ a society’s dislocations and inscribe a growing range of demands and identities, it can begin to function as a social imaginary, that is, ‘a horizon’ or ‘absolute limit which structures a field of intelligibility’.

From this perspective, the NP’s victory in 1948 can be viewed as the triumph of a discourse built around ‘apartheid’ as an empty signifier, as it is clear that this ideology was perceived to be better able to address the economic dislocations and political crises engendered by the so-called ‘Native Question’ (‘influx control’, the ‘urban problem’) confronting Afrikaners in the 1930s and 1940s. This new myth of ‘separateness’ provided a point of identification, which had the capacity to link together and cement an Afrikaner nationalist alliance of farmers, workers and petty bourgeoisie by promising radical, if nebulous and indeterminate, solutions to satisfy their particular problems. By the 1960s, this ‘mythical space’ of representation had been transformed into a fully-fledged social imaginary – the idea of ‘separate development’ – in which Afrikaner identity and its attendant economic interests could co-exist with other ethnic and racial identities, each with their own territories and institutions, in a ‘legitimate’ system of differences.

38. Laclau, New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time, 64. As the relationship between a dislocated structure and the sway of an empty signifier is contingent, empirical research is required to show how and why one succeeds while another fails, and also to investigate the mechanisms by which this contingency is concealed (naturalization, universalization, and so on).
40. O’Meara, Volkskapitalisme, 243.
41. Norval, Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse, 7-8, 9.
The shift from a discourse of white domination (‘baaskap’) to its justification in terms of ‘separate development’ goes some way toward explaining the hold of apartheid ideology and the identities it sustained. However, this account of a subject’s symbolic identifications with a mythical fullness ought to be supplemented by what Lacanian theorists such as Slavoj Žižek call ‘the enjoyment factor’ in sustaining ideological beliefs and practices. This perspective asks us to look beyond the level of symbolic identification to the unconscious desires and libidinal investments that structure and fuel our identities. Important in this regard is the subject’s identification with a fantasmatic object that keeps desire, and thus identification, alive. This fantasmatic object (the object petit a in Lacanian theory) is entirely external to the symbolic order – it is a ‘surplus’ that can never be domesticated by any symbolizing structure – and functions as the cause of desire. It consequently operates as the necessary ideological illusion that supports social reality itself. Moreover, as the fantasy is prohibited by a given social order, it can sustain the subject’s desire because each of the transgressions it evinces keeps open the (illusion) of closure produced by the empty signifier. In this way, it provides the means for a subject to enjoy, to gain access to its jouissance. In social terms, this enjoyment is relegated (from the public official discourse) to the unofficial and private levels, and functions as a means for the subject to enjoy. But it also bolsters the consistency of the official public law itself by seeking to erase the latter’s dependence on it. The task of the researcher is thus to detect the traces of this obscene enjoyment in unofficial and private discourses, to show how it strengthens identifications with a given order of discourse, and also to make possible a critique of ideology by dislodging the source of the enjoyment.

Returning to the case of apartheid discourse, this model can help us to locate beneath the public rhetoric of ‘apartheid’, ‘separate development’, ‘equal nationhood’, the ‘Total Strategy’, and so forth, the fantasmatic objects that sustained desire and identification. Initially, the fantasy was of a pure, uncontaminated and homogenous white Afrikaner ‘volk’ threatened and undermined by the figures of ‘Hoggenheimer’ (the rich Jewish imperialist) and the ‘swart gevaar’ (‘black peril’), as well as the process of ‘oorstrooming’ (the overrunning of the cities by the native masses). It was later to evolve into the fantasy of a ‘“White’s Only” South Africa’, of a world with ‘no black South Africans’, that is, of a white South Africa admitting only migrant black workers from other nations. Despite

42. Žižek, For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor (London, 1991).
43. Žižek, The Sublime Object of Ideology, 45.
44. Norval, Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse, 57-100.
45. As Piet Koornhof, then Deputy Minister of Bantu Affairs, put it in Parliament in 1971: ‘The fact of the matter is that we on this side of the House have a vision and a policy ... the policy of multi-nationalism ... Whether a Bantu was born in Soweto or any other prescribed area, he is and remains first of all a member of his people ... Nor does it matter how long he has been
the major practical impediments in realizing these goals - the need for black labour and the consequent growth of African urbanization in white areas - problems which were recognized by apartheid ideologues themselves, they were still pursued with ruthlessness and systematic efficiency. Thus while Heribert Adam's landmark description of apartheid as 'a pragmatic race oligarchy' captures something of the effects of the political system, it misses the important unconscious investments in the 'ideals' of apartheid ideology by both its leaders and supporters alike. How else can the fanatical zeal accompanying the removal of 'black spots', the policing of 'group areas', the enforcement of pass law violations, and the creation of independent homelands, be explained? Indeed, from the perspective outlined, it is precisely the resulting transgressions of the impossible apartheid ideal, and then the increasingly baroque solutions required to deal with them, that sustained the grip and the identities it fostered. Moreover, it is only by examining the failure and disintegration of these fantasmatic objects that we can begin to explain the failure of Afrikaner identity to grip in the way it did during the apartheid period.

The Limits of Social Science?

Among other things, my brief remarks on the emergence and consolidation of a South African identity, and the fantasies underpinning the apartheid project, show the importance of history and the historical imagination in accounting for the politicization and grip of identities. Implicitly, however, they also pose questions about the role and limits of social scientific explanation, and its relationship to a historicizing account of social phenomena. I will thus conclude this essay with a few observations about the philosophy and methods of social science.

At the outset, it must be stressed that Jung correctly avoids the corrosive effects of rational choice theory, which has swept all before it in American social and political science, and problematizes the determinism and essentialism of Marxist accounts of identity, which reduce identities to underlying material forces. Her use of empirical cases to contest the divided society thesis, and to question the underlying assumptions of constitutional and institutional engineering is, moreover, legitimate and compelling.
Nevertheless, she still casts her arguments in the language of mainstream positivist social science. Hence her analysis seeks to 'test' which independent variables (or combination of variables) best account for her dependent variable (the resonance of political identity); her overall goal is to establish the correct causal linkages between these variables (p. 25); and she makes considerable use of various types of quantitative data, especially opinion polls and election results, to draw inferences about the resonance of political identities. This reliance on scientific language and its attendant methodological presumptions clashes with other aspects of her text in which she presents careful historical descriptions and interpretations of complex, indeterminate and changing social relationships. In the latter mode, Jung’s work is best classified as a form of social constructionism in which the normative and critical underpinnings of her approach are more easily foregrounded.

Indeed, her substantive conclusions betray the rigid causal models and explanations she strives after. For instance, Jung presents the following conclusions about the changing character of political identities:

The relative fluidity of political identities depends primarily on shifts and interactions among conditioning factors. Political identities are more likely to change when conditioning variables change. Although it is only in political transitions that political institutions, and in particular electoral laws, are likely to be modified, conditioning factors are at least potentially in more or less constant flux. They have the potential to shift both slowly, in incremental ways that undergo semiconstant renegotiation and interaction, and quickly, in response to external shocks or paradigm shifts. They also, however, have the potential to atrophy into apparently enduring systems of hierarchy and social organization. Though it is unlikely that political identities will ever actually be permanent, the appearance of permanence may be equally harmful to the democratic project and its electoral patterns (p. 250, my emphases).

This passage highlights the provisional and qualified character of Jung’s conclusions, and it is exemplary of the fuzziness that pervades many of her descriptions and explanatory propositions. Its tentativeness is especially problematic given the author’s desire to offer a scientific account of identity formation and grip. Indeed, any red-blooded Popperian searching for falsifiable statements to test would wince at the lack of precision and determinacy.

Given this, Then I was Black might be described as a kind of 'compromise-formation', which remains torn between a positivist treatise that inquires into the causes of the resonance of some identities over others, and a fully-fledged historical hermeneutics or interpretivism that is sensitive to the meanings of
There are three basic problems associated with this tension: the semblance of (social) scientific methodology in Jung's text; the character of the explanatory variables themselves; and the evidence she collects and utilizes to draw inferences and reach conclusions. I tackle each of these in turn.

In general, mainstream proponents of social science would have us believe that explanations take two basic forms. Those advocating the hypothetico-deductive method begin with the theoretical assumptions with which they construct formal models and hypotheses. These are then tested for their explanatory and predictive power. Those employing inductive methods, by contrast, start with a series of carefully selected empirical cases and then infer empirical generalizations and more ambitiously laws from the cases examined. Jung's account does not fit neatly into either of these ideal-types of social science research. While this is not problematic for a fully-fledged political constructivism that articulates a basic set of ontological assumptions, and then provides descriptions and interpretations of problematized social phenomena, it is troublesome for an account that seeks to pinpoint independent variables to explain dependent variables. In Jung's case, we are not really clear what proposition or set of propositions she is testing. As the author herself admits, '[c]ausal models that depend upon a single variable produce a more determinate analysis than identity can sustain', such that resonance is 'more likely the result of the partly interdependent operation of multiple variables' (p. 25). In short, the implied testing of a theoretical model of identity formation and resonance is misleading, and Jung's complex and interconnected web of variables undermines the desired explanatory leverage associated with the scientific ideal.

A second set of difficulties concern the explanatory variables themselves. To begin with, we are offered little or no rationale for their selection. At best, we are informed that 'empirical evidence suggests' that these are the relevant factors (p. 25), but we are not told whether they are inferred from the South African case studies, or derived from higher-order theoretical assumptions and statements.

There is also some imprecision about the meaning of the variables. What for example does Jung mean by 'material conditions'? How do they function as a

48. As Laplanche and Pontalis put it, Freud used the term 'compromise formation' to account for the 'form taken by the repressed memory so as to be admitted to consciousness when it returns in symptoms, dreams and, more generally, in all products of the unconscious: in the process the repressed ideas are distorted by defence to the point of being unrecognisable.' See J. Laplanche and J-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London, 1988), 76. The example of a fully-fledged historical hermeneutics or interpretivism I have in mind is evident in C. Taylor, 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 25, 1 (1971), 3-51.

49. I take this idea of projecting ontopolitical interpretations into an object of study so as to reveal unacknowledged presuppositions and to dislodge sedimented understandings from William Connolly's synthesis of Nietzsche and Foucault. See W.E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis, 1995).
conditioning variable? Are the latter constraints or determinants? How do they constrain or determine? We are told that material conditions ‘partly structure the place of the individual in society, in the economy, and in relation to other individuals and groups’. Thus the economic system ‘may contribute to a person’s understanding of self, place, and, potentially, membership’; class differences ‘may lead to distinct and occasionally conflicting sets of interests’, and ‘[u]nequal access to material resources leads to competition, and competition may take violent form’ (pp. 30-1). It is clear that the relationship between this so-called objective condition and the dependent variable it is purported to explain is extremely contingent. Moreover, as I suggest above, it is itself dependent on and related to other conditioning and proximate factors.

We are also not really clear about the conceptual differences between variables. To take one example, how are we to distinguish between ‘mobilizing discourse’ and ‘available ideology’? Jung divides them into proximate and conditioning variables, in which mobilizing discourse belongs to the former category and available ideology to the latter. However, this division is not easy to sustain, and the author acknowledges their blurring and interweaving. She argues, for example, that ‘[i]ndividual farmers may feel some solidarity with other farmers’, as these are ‘the types of objective conditions their economic systems generate’, but then goes on to acknowledge that such identities ‘will probably remain latent ... unless mobilized by agents’ (p. 30). As I have already suggested, the distinction between proximate and conditioning variables might be better understood in terms of a reworked model of structure and agency (itself derived from the distinction between identity and identification). Finally, we are not told enough about the relationship between the different variables, apart from the fact that their ‘complex interaction’ results in the emergence and grip of political identity (p. 25). Jung’s model implies for instance that there is a relationship between material interests and political identities, but we need an explanation of how these factors come to matter to agents’ identities, which in turn requires an understanding of the political logics involved in constructing identities and interests.

Overall, more theoretical work is needed with respect to each of Jung’s variables if her model is to acquire sufficient precision to produce the explanatory leverage she desires. More realistically, her explanatory variables are better understood as heuristic devices that can guide the collection, organization and presentation of evidence and argument. In this regard, they would be better

50. I have also argued, from a political constructivist position, that this model would need to be predicated on the idea that social structures are incomplete and contingent entities vulnerable to dislocations and incompatibilities, and would need to acknowledge that social structures are agency dependent in that one agent’s structure can be another’s another facilitating condition.
articulated alongside a coherently articulated ontology of social relations, and then put to work around a set of carefully problematized research questions, as I have shown above. In Jung’s work two crucial research problems that remain largely implicit concern the mechanisms that sustain identifications, and the production of a South African political identity in the face of previously ascribed and sedimented racial and ethnic identities.

A final reason for the tensions in Jung’s methodology centres on Jung’s data. For the most part, Then I was Black is based on three sorts of data: voting patterns, opinion polls, and personal in-depth interviews (p. 38). Two issues arise in this regard. On the one hand, there is a query about the status and appropriateness of the data employed to address her research questions. As Jung herself recognizes, both the quantitative and qualitative data she employs carry considerable risks in capturing ‘the evolving features of political identities over time’ (p. 38). Voting patterns only ‘provide a rough sketch of political identity’ and at best provide only a ‘broad idea of what the political landscape looks like’ (p. 36). Similarly, survey evidence is an ‘imperfect indicator’, as ‘the respondent may be expressing a cultural or linguistic identity that she does not perceive as politically relevant’ (p. 37). In-depth interviews, for their part, are not necessarily accurate representations of changing political identities, as social actors consciously or unconsciously remember selectively, choosing to highlight certain events and processes over others. Jung’s reliance on interviewing elites, moreover, does not provide sufficient corroboration for the findings she presents, especially with regard to the take-up and grip of identity. There are, in short, immense difficulties in employing mainly quantitative data to capture the nuances and complexities of identity formation and change. Moreover, the cumulative effect of these observations is to throw into sharp relief the omission of certain types of data. More particularly, documentary evidence is underused, as is the employment of case studies to gain ‘thick descriptive’ insight into the minutia and concrete particularity of identity formation and change. Instead, a strong case can be made that a more thoroughly historical and ethnographic approach is generally more suited to track the dissemination and take up of political identity.

Conclusion

If one measure of a book’s importance is the degree to which it provokes and stimulates thought, then Courtney Jung’s Then I Was Black has succeeded admirably. In examining her claims about changing ethnic and racial identities in

the transition from apartheid to post-apartheid, I have used its bold arguments as a vehicle to explore a range of theoretical, substantive and methodological issues pertaining to our understanding of political identity. I have argued that her critiques of so-called ‘divided societies’, and the need for an institutional engineering that can cope with the pathologies of ethnic and racial identities, are clearly and forcefully articulated. Jung’s account of political identity, by contrast, falls short on both theoretical and empirical grounds. I suggested that her explanation of the mobilization of identities by political elites is insufficiently attentive to structural factors, which I then conceptualized in terms of the structural dislocations that make agency possible. On the other hand, somewhat paradoxically perhaps, I claimed that her account of the resonance of political identities is too structural, because it neglects the role of agency considerations in the sedimentation and iteration of identity formation. This is because she tends to bifurcate structure and agency factors in line with her distinction between conditioning and proximate factors. I also argued that Jung does not provide us with the necessary conceptual resources to account for the grip and sedimentation of ethnic and racial identities.

Instead, drawing on post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theory, I distinguished between identity and identification, which enables the construction of a more dynamic conceptualisation of the relationship between structures and agents. In this model, political agency becomes possible in conditions where the contingency and undecidability of structures are made visible by dislocatory events. I also argued that more attention had to be focused on the way in which political identities based on race and ethnicity grip and are sedimented. This would involve paying greater attention to the historical antecedents of identity formation, but also to the ontological conditions under which identities are formed and sustained. In particular, I emphasized the role of fantasy as a crucial underpinning of ethnic and racial identity, and I drew attention to the hegemonic practices through which ethnic and identities are produced and reproduced.

These theoretical resources enabled me to advance some alternative readings of identity formation and resonance in the South African context, and to propose an alternative set of hypotheses for future historical research. More particularly, attention to the fantasies underlying apartheid discourse enables us to go some way in explaining its peculiar hold on large numbers of Afrikaners and white South Africans, and also to account for the rapid disintegration of an Afrikaner political identity in the post-apartheid period. In a similar vein, I proposed an important counterfactual question neglected by Jung’s account, namely, the slow but sure constitution of a South African national identity with specific political, legal and moral resonances. Without an explanation of the grip and sedimentation of this political identity Jung’s account of changing Afrikaner, Coloured and Zulu identities runs the severe risk of missing the wood for the trees. Finally, I drew
attention to the tensions involved in seeking to develop an apparently scientific account of identity formation and resonance, and insisted instead on the importance of a distinctively historical and ethnographic sensibility in tackling issues of this kind.