2
Brand new the Self

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2.1 Introduction

In this chapter we focus on the origins of two powerful ‘models of identity’, two powerful ways of constructing ‘identity’. One is constructed and propagated by nation-states, the other by global corporations and their agents. Both models involve classifications which not only have material effects in people’s lives, but also provide them with resources for talking about their own identity, and about identity generally. We will begin with an example of such identity talk, an extract from a research interview with two 37-year-old women. They were asked to describe their identity to a male interlocutor, and they did so confidently. As one of them said: ‘I know who I am and what I want.’

Extract 1

Woman A: I am a confident person. I think that this is difficult for men.
Machin: What do you mean by confident?
Woman A: Well, me and my friends, we are just confident and independent. I guess we just really know ourselves. We are independent. Men don’t know what to do with this.
Machin: What do you mean?
Woman A: Well my friends just do anything they want, when they want.
Machin: Like what?
Woman A: Well anything. They go to parties, they like dancing. I really like cars.
Woman B: They have whatever boyfriends they want. The men have been doing it for years and now we can do exactly the same. I have a friend who just picks guys up. She knows just what she wants.
Machin: Are they independent in terms of political thinking?
Woman A: I just don’t bother with politics, you have to get on with life, not be so heavy. Live a bit. You have to get out some.

Woman B: Well I think it’s about really knowing yourself. You have to know who you are. I think my boyfriend has difficulty with that. I just say to him I am independent and I am proud of that. I just know who I am and what I want.

Identity is here first of all female identity, positively contrasted to male identity. Being a woman is fundamental to these women’s view of who they are. Other features of identity are ‘psychological’ rather than social, ‘personality traits’ such as ‘confident’ and ‘independent’, or based on preferred leisure time activities such as ‘going to parties’ and ‘picking up guys’ and consumer goods such as ‘cars’. Many other potential aspects of identity, however, are not mentioned, for instance nationality, race, class background, family relationships (being someone’s daughter, wife, lover, mother, aunt, etc.), job, income level, education, religion, political convictions, and so on. As it happens, both women work in a child nursery. Their income is low, they do not have a fixed contract, and they live in rented accommodation. But they do not choose to see that as part of ‘who they are’.

The interview was part of a research project on the magazine *Cosmopolitan* (see Machin and Van Leeuwen, 2003, 2004, in press) in which we analysed the model of female identity this magazine disseminates. In this model, we argued, women are part of a global sisterhood of ‘fun, fearless women’, yet essentially on their own. They may have friends and colleagues, but they have no parents or children, and the few husbands that appear are usually a source of problems. They do not have political or religious beliefs or forms of community and solidarity, and their chief preoccupations are the pursuit of romantic adventure and sexual pleasure, of health and beauty, of consumer goods and pleasurable activities, and of career success, although the latter varies across different versions. The ‘career’ sections in the Indian version of *Cosmopolitan*, for instance, address their readers as though they are company directors, managers or self-employed designers, actors, and the like, while the career sections in European versions address their readers as though they are employees, usually in offices (Machin and Van Leeuwen, 2004). Clearly there are similarities between this model and the way the women in the interview described their identity to us.

In this chapter we want to take this issue a bit further. We will contrast two dominant sets of identity categories, or ‘models of identity’, that are now available in contemporary society, often in an uneasy tension with each other, a tension which, we feel, is insufficiently acknowledged in the literature. One is imposed by nation-states and reinforced in national news