

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



On Identity

Amin Maalouf

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About the Authors

AMIN MAALOUF was formerly director of the leading Beirut daily, *an-Nahar*, and the editor of *Jeune Afrique*. His fiction, in English translation, includes *Leo the African*, *The Rock of Tanios* (which won the 1993 Prix Goncourt), *Samarkand* and *The Gardens of Light*. He has also written an acclaimed scholarly work, *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*.

BARBARA BRAY has twice won the Scott-Moncrieff Prize, as well as the French-American Foundation Prize, for her translations. These include *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras, *The Concert* by Ismail Kadare, and Georges Sand's letters in *Flaubert-Sand: The Correspondence*.

Also by Amin Maalouf in English translation

Fiction

LEO THE AFRICAN

SAMARKAND

THE FIRST CENTURY AFTER BEATRICE

THE ROCK OF TANIOS

THE GARDENS OF LIGHT

PORTS OF CALL

Non-fiction

THE CRUSADES THROUGH ARAB EYES

*for Andrée
for Ruchdi
for Tarek
for Ziad*

On Identity

Amin Maalouf

Translated from the French by Barbara Bray



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How many times, since I left Lebanon in 1976 to live in France, have people asked me, with the best intentions in the world, whether I felt “more French” or “more Lebanese”? And I always give the same answer: “Both!” I say that not in the interests of fairness or balance, but because any other answer would be a lie. What makes me myself rather than anyone else is the very fact that I am poised between two countries, two or three languages and several cultural traditions. It is precisely this that defines my identity. Would I exist more authentically if I cut off a part of myself?

To those who ask the question, I patiently explain that I was born in Lebanon and lived there until I was 27; that Arabic is my mother tongue; that it was in Arabic translation that I first read Dumas and Dickens and *Gulliver's Travels*; and that it was in my native village, the village of my ancestors, that I experienced the pleasures of childhood and heard some of the stories that were later to inspire my novels. How could I forget all that? How could I cast it aside? On the other hand, I have lived for 22 years on the soil of France; I drink her water and wine; every day my hands touch her ancient stones; I write my books in her language; never again will she be a foreign country to me.

So am I half French and half Lebanese? Of course not. Identity can't be compartmentalised. You can't divide it up into halves or thirds or any other separate segments. I haven't got several identities: I've got just one, made up of many components combined together in a mixture that is unique to every individual.

Sometimes, after I've been giving a detailed account of exactly why I lay claim to all my affiliations, someone comes and pats me on the shoulder and says “Of course, of course – but what do you really feel, deep down inside?”

For a long time I found this oft-repeated question amusing, but it no longer makes me smile. It seems to reflect a view of humanity which, though it is widespread, is

also in my opinion dangerous. It presupposes that “deep down inside” everyone there is just one affiliation that really matters, a kind of “fundamental truth” about each individual, an “essence” determined once and for all at birth, never to change thereafter. As if the rest, all the rest – a person’s whole journey through time as a free agent; the beliefs he acquires in the course of that journey; his own individual tastes, sensibilities and affinities; in short his life itself – counted for nothing. And when, as happens so often nowadays, our contemporaries are exhorted to “assert their identity”, they are meant to seek within themselves that same alleged fundamental allegiance, which is often religious, national, racial or ethnic, and having located it they are supposed to flaunt it proudly in the face of others.

Anyone who claims a more complex identity is marginalised. But a young man born in France of Algerian parents clearly carries within him two different allegiances or “belongings”, and he ought to be allowed to use both. For the sake of argument I refer to two “belongings”, but in fact such a youth’s personality is made up of many more ingredients. Within him, French, European and other western influences mingle with Arab, Berber, African, Muslim and other sources, whether with regard to language, beliefs, family relationships or to tastes in cooking and the arts. This represents an enriching and fertile experience if the young man in question feels free to live it fully – if he is encouraged to accept it in all its diversity. But it can be traumatic if whenever he claims to be French other people look on him as a traitor or renegade, and if every time he emphasises his ties with Algeria and its history, culture and religion he meets with incomprehension, mistrust or even outright hostility.

The situation is even more difficult on the other side of the Rhine. I’m thinking of the case of a Turk who might have been born near Frankfurt 30 years ago and who has always

lived in Germany. He speaks and writes German better than the language of his ancestors. Yet for the society of his adopted country he isn't a German, while for that of his origins he is no longer completely a Turk. Common sense dictates that he should be able to claim both allegiances. But at present neither the law nor people's attitudes allows him to accept his composite identity tranquilly.

I have quoted the first examples that came to mind, but I could have used many others. For instance, that of someone born in Belgrade of a Serbian mother and a Croatian father. That of a Hutu woman married to a Tutsi, or vice versa. Or that of an American with a black father and a Jewish mother.

It may be said that these are special cases. I don't agree. The handful of people I've cited are not the only ones with a complex identity. Every individual is a meeting ground for many different allegiances, and sometimes these loyalties conflict with one another and confront the person who harbours them with difficult choices. In some cases the situation is obvious at a glance; others need to be looked at more closely.

Is there any citizen of present-day Europe who doesn't sense a kind of tug-of-war, an inevitably ever-increasing conflict between on the one hand his affiliation to an ancient country like France, Spain, Denmark or England, and, on the other, his allegiance to the continental entity that is in the process of forming? And there are many dedicated "Europeans", from the Basque country to Scotland, who at the same time feel a strong and fundamental attachment to a particular region and its people, its history and its language. Can anyone in the United States even today assess his place in society without reference to his earlier connections, whether they be African, Hispanic, Irish, Jewish, Italian, Polish or other?

That said, I'm prepared to admit that the first examples I cited are to a certain extent special. All the people concerned in them are arenas for allegiances currently in

violent conflict with one another: they live in a sort of frontier zone criss-crossed by ethnic, religious and other fault lines. But by virtue of this situation – peculiar rather than privileged – they have a special role to play in forging links, eliminating misunderstandings, making some parties more reasonable and others less belligerent, smoothing out difficulties, seeking compromise. Their role is to act as bridges, go-betweens, mediators between the various communities and cultures. And that is precisely why their dilemma is so significant: if they themselves cannot sustain their multiple allegiances, if they are continually being pressed to take sides or ordered to stay within their own tribe, then all of us have reason to be uneasy about the way the world is going.

I talk of their being “pressed” and “ordered” – but by whom? Not just by fanatics and xenophobes of all kinds, but also by you and me, by each and all of us. And we do so precisely because of habits of thought and expression deeply rooted in us all; because of a narrow, exclusive, bigoted, simplistic attitude that reduces identity in all its many aspects to one single affiliation, and one that is proclaimed in anger.

I feel like shouting aloud that this is how murderers are made – it’s a recipe for massacres! That may sound somewhat extreme, but in the pages that follow I shall try to explain what I mean.

1

My identity, my allegiances

1

A LIFE SPENT writing has taught me to be wary of words. Those that seem clearest are often the most treacherous. "Identity" is one of those false friends. We all think we know what the word means and go on trusting it, even when it's slyly starting to say the opposite.

Far be it from me to want to keep on redefining the idea of identity. It has been the fundamental question of philosophy from Socrates' "Know thyself!" through countless other masters down to Freud. To approach it anew today would call for more qualifications than I possess and for very much greater temerity. The task I set myself is more modest. I want to try to understand why so many people commit crimes nowadays in the name of religious, ethnic, national or some other kind of identity. Has it always been like this since time immemorial, or is the present era influenced by hitherto unknown factors? Sometimes what I say may seem rather simplistic. If so it's because I want to set my argument out as calmly, patiently and fairly as possible, without resorting to jargon or unwarranted short cuts.

What's known as an identity card carries the holder's family name, given name, date and place of birth, photograph, a list of certain physical features, the holder's signature and sometimes also his fingerprints - a whole array of details designed to prove without a shadow of doubt or confusion that the bearer of the document is So-and-so, and that amongst all the millions of other human beings there isn't one - not even his double or his twin brother - for whom he could be mistaken.

My identity is what prevents me from being identical to anybody else.

Defined in this way the word identity reflects a fairly precise idea – one which in theory should not give rise to confusion. Do we really need lengthy arguments to prove that there are not and cannot be two identical individuals? Even if in the near future someone manages, as we fear they may, to “clone” human beings, the clones would at best be identical only at the time of their “birth”; as soon as they started to live they would start being different.

Each individual’s identity is made up of a number of elements, and these are clearly not restricted to the particulars set down in official records. Of course, for the great majority these factors include allegiance to a religious tradition; to a nationality – sometimes two; to a profession, an institution, or a particular social milieu. But the list is much longer than that; it is virtually unlimited. A person may feel a more or less strong attachment to a province, a village, a neighbourhood, a clan, a professional team or one connected with sport, a group of friends, a union, a company, a parish, a community of people with the same passions, the same sexual preferences, the same physical handicaps, or who have to deal with the same kind of pollution or other nuisance.

Of course, not all these allegiances are equally strong, at least at any given moment. But none is entirely insignificant, either. All are components of personality – we might almost call them “genes of the soul” so long as we remember that most of them are not innate.

While each of these elements may be found separately in many individuals, the same combination of them is never encountered in different people, and it’s this that gives every individual richness and value and makes each human being unique and irreplaceable.

It can happen that some incident, a fortunate or unfortunate accident, even a chance encounter, influences