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Identity as Infrastructure: Toward a Theory of Social Order and Coordination

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Abstract

Contemporary social theory typically treats identity as a category of belonging, a form of self-understanding, or a site of cultural and political contestation. While these approaches have generated important insights into the construction and performance of identity, they often leave underexamined the role identity plays in the reproduction of social order. This paper proposes an alternative perspective by conceptualising identity as a form of social infrastructure.

Drawing on Identity Group Theory (IGT), the paper argues that identities do not merely describe individuals or groups but function as organising systems that enable, coordinate, and regulate social action. Like physical, institutional, or digital infrastructures, identities structure expectations, distribute legitimacy, allocate resources, and channel behaviour across social contexts. Through participation in multiple identity economies, individuals acquire recognition, obligations, privileges, and constraints that shape their decisions and interactions.

The paper develops a theoretical framework for understanding how identity infrastructures operate through mechanisms of allocation, regulation, salience, and recognition. It further explores how these mechanisms contribute to social coordination beyond formal institutions, legal systems, and market incentives. By shifting attention from what identities are to what identities do, the paper offers a new way of analysing the relationship between identity, power, and social order.

The concept of identity as infrastructure provides a foundation for interdisciplinary research across sociology, political science, communication studies, anthropology, and related fields, while extending ongoing debates concerning identity, recognition, governance, and collective action.

Keywords: Identity Group Theory (IGT); Identity Infrastructure; Social Order; Social Coordination; Recognition; Governance