FINAL MANUSCRIPT VERSION

Arango, Alejandro, and Adam Burgos, eds. “Introduction: Identities Unfolding in the Social World.” In *New Perspectives on the Ontology of Social Identities*. Routledge Studies in Contemporary Philosophy. Routledge, 2024.

**Introduction: Identities Unfolding in the Social World**

Alejandro Arango & Adam Burgos

Theories about social identities are not in short supply. In the 20th century, philosophies of race, feminist philosophies, the phenomenological tradition, and critical theory approaches came to recognize, more explicitly than before, the centrality of race and gender to the lives of individuals and, often, the contextual and differential importance they have for persons. While we can find philosophical contributions in these areas earlier than the 20th century, especially in the contributions of women philosophers, or in what might be called a Marxian conceptualization of class, these reflections did not have the systematicity they have now had for a while. With this process has also come a greater understanding of the concrete implications of social identities, especially as a contributor to the organization of society, and to a lesser extent in matters of self-conception and self-understanding. Social identities impact the way we think of ourselves and our capacities, the way we understand our place in the world and the way we construct meaning of the world, in whose social aspect those identities matter.

In this already rich context, it seemed to us a couple of years past that there was room for theorizing about social identities that took a different shape, and was not necessarily wedded or limited to the traditional categories. In that spirit emerged the guiding question that eventually led to this volume, a bird’s eye kind of question: What would we find if we zoom out and explore what scholars are working on about social identities in general, instead of asking specifically about race and gender, sometimes, perhaps, class? Would this broad question take us to insights and lines of work that do not appear when we focus on the traditionally established identities as a starting point?

A version of this question was the topic of a workshop held at Bucknell University in the Summer of 2022, co-organized by the editors of this volume. The variety of contributions presented there, made it clear that it was high time to think about social identities in a way that challenges the basic categories of the field and that crosses the boundaries of the traditional areas of philosophy.

In keeping with that spirit, this volume reflects our interest in exploring the limits of traditional accounts of social identities in general and of specific social identities in particular. The contributions contained here do not easily fit into the traditional areas of philosophical inquiry. Rather, as the reader will find, social ontology contributions intersect with social epistemological questions and invite the inclusion of value aspects. Likewise, questions about our knowing of, and coming to know about, social identities are criss-crossed by value-normative issues, which span ethical, social, and political considerations. Proposals that look carefully at the pragmatics of social identities, and that sometimes reject any strong distinction between ontology and epistemology, bring normative elements into view. It is in that sense that this volume includes work that engages broadly with what an ontological inquiry into social identities might mean.

The essays included here deal with a variety of social identity types, issues, and frameworks, including historically defined social forces exerted on us that mold our identities, paths and opportunities afforded or not to persons in concrete sociohistorical circumstances, processes of changing and modifying identities, the role of affect and subjective experience in social identification, the idea of vulnerability as part of the constitution of identities, and how particularly situated concepts (in this case, ‘bravery’ in the context of physical and sexual violence against women) that qualify identities contribute to shaping what those identities mean, among others.

This collection is, then, an *abrebocas,* an *entry way* to theorizing about social identities in novel ways, and the essays collected here point to specific modes of understanding and experiencing social identities that have not been given their due or that offer new approaches to well-worn topics.

In order to orient the reader within the discourse of the volume and some of the different approaches that it is possible to take regarding social identities, we briefly outline three recent views of social identities that can be found in the literature, beginning with our own and then offering two contrasting approaches.

We generally agree with the tendency of philosophers to understand social identities as realities captured by terms like sexual orientation, gender identity, class, and race. This is, so to speak, an ostensive agreement, yet one that we take only as a methodological clue indicating where to begin exploring. Acknowledging their reality as social identities does not commit us to a particular ontology for those kinds –the underlying ontology can be questioned and further explored. As we have put it elsewhere:

“Our aim is not to analyze or understand social identities as ‘givens,’ that is, as specific types of pieces that move around on any (social) board, but instead aim for an engagement with *what those pieces are in each case*, *how those pieces are crafted, and for what board*. We could perhaps call what we are doing, therefore, a politics or a pragmatics of historically contingent, socially and politically produced social identities, and understanding them in their social interplay” (Arango & Burgos 2023, 3; emphasis added).

Our way of engaging with social identities aims at the conditions that make different social identities possible, in a basic sense, as elements of social reality, and that therefore also shape what they can be and do within the social world at large and within different social niches in particular.

In trying to distinguish between different types of group ascriptions, we argue that “social identities organize social life significantly, for individuals and for society, in terms of the division of labor; the structuring of power; and the distribution of the burdens and benefits of prestige, money, and other social and political goods” (Arango & Burgos 2023, 2). In Charles Mills’ language, these social identities are “contingently deep [realities] that [structure] our particular social universe, having a social objectivity and causal significance that arise out of our particular history” (Mills 1998, 48). In our view, identities are first and foremost what we call “thick” social identities, and the reasoning here is pragmatist in kind.

For instance, it is still an open question whether other group ascriptions may amount, in the right context and with the right dynamics, to social identities, which may include age groups, generations, political affiliations, religious identities, sports fandom, and professional or occupational identifications, among others. Among the criteria that may include or exclude some group identifications as social identities are, for example, issues relating to whether those identities are chosen or unchosen, or sit somewhere in between, or relating to how weighty they are in a person’s self-conception. Furthermore, individuals are inevitably constituted by several of these at once, some of which may fade into the background for a time or come to the fore depending on the circumstances and the stakes involved.

*Thick* social identities are often represented by standard categories, such as race, gender, or class. But they do not necessarily map onto the existing categories. An example of how social identity theorizing can and sometimes should defy the traditional categories is reflected in our own work on the social identities of Latinx persons in the U.S., where it is argued that neither race nor ethnicity are adequate to understand different Latinidad(es) (Arango & Burgos 2022). What makes Latinidad(es) to be social identities, in our view, is that they structure social life and play an important role in the subjective sense of those who both see themselves and are typically taken by others as embodying that identity. But, importantly, Latinidad(es), in all its plurality and internal diversity, is not a racial formation and is not an ethnic one, even though it invites race-like and ethnic-like interactions. Similarly, when we abstract in general to social identities, our take is that what makes race, ethnicity or gender to be what they are is the type of interactions they afford to others, in a particularly historically constituted and socially situated niche, in which those identities take shape. That general view of social identities is what we have called the social affordances view of social identities, and underlies our take on Latinidad(es) (Arango & Burgos, 2023).

Two additional available views in recent literature do not focus on thick identities but more on thinking through the different types of social groupings that may give rise to group ascription and, consequently, to social identities, or on the *roles of* individuals within groups, and so stand in contrast to our own approach in important ways.

The first contrast comes from the Cambridge Social Ontology group, a variety of social positioning theory. Their view, broadly speaking, understands social identity as being allocated a certain social position, and being so positioned means that one has certain rights and obligations. A standard example is a university professor, or an entity such as a corporation. But it is a central assumption that these identities are “accepted,” as part of a practical dimension in which agents “go along” with these allocations. Perhaps the most significant problem with this view is that it has no place for the subjective sense of agents as they are “located” in society. The subjective sense is absent in more than one way here: it downplays situations of oppression (as if the person can be meaningfully spoken as go along with obligations derived from situations of oppression: do women have an obligation to be paid less than men?), and it does not take into account aspects of one’s interaction in the social space that are not “obligations” – cultural, symbolic elements. As Tony Lawson, a leading member of the group, puts it: “A position is essentially a locus of a set of specific rights and obligations, where the accepted position occupants are agents or bearers of these rights and obligations and typically possess a status or identity associated with them.” [(Lawson 2014, 18)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?GGBks6).

In our view, alternatively, social identities are not reducible to roles, positions, or functions because of the subjective element of their two-fold character. They are also not allocated according to consensus-based rules in the same ways that a professor would be. We have much more to say about our view in comparison to the Cambridge view, but will have to move on in the interest of time.

A second contrastive view comes from Weichold & Thonhauser in a discussion of embodied and collective identities. They describe “traditional social identity theory” as focusing on an individual’s “self-identification with a certain social category (e.g., college student, female, white, European, fan of FC St. Pauli)” [(Weichold and Thonhauser 2020, 12)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?380Wn3). The list of social identities provided that fall under that rubric is at least potentially too broad. It seems as though identities like “white” and “fan of FC St. Pauli” are of two different kinds, given the differential impact of these two categories on life chances. At the very least, it would have to be shown and not assumed that in some social context being a fan of a football team impacts one’s life in the same ways as one’s race.

They further gloss their view of how these identities function when they write, “If a social identity (e.g., as a student, or as a fan of a football team) is made salient, an individual does not evaluate a situation from her own perspective, but from the perspective of the relevant group. In such cases, individuals react to events that positively or negatively affect the group, even if the events do not affect them personally” [(Weichold and Thonhauser 2020, 13)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?RhzKDI). Although Weichold & Thonhauser are making an intervention into this “traditional” theory, they are not contesting the types of identities included, they are rather extending the same dynamic from the individual to the collective.

These two modes of understanding social identities fall short of our thick criteria in two different ways. On the one hand, voluntary associations like fandom, while they may take over one’s life to a significant degree and dictate all or most of one’s decision making, nonetheless remain tethered to agency in ways categorically different from those drivers of identity that are imposed on us from the outside. On the other hand, the types of institutional roles outlined by the Cambridge group are purely structural, but only at the level of formal institutions and not in the structure of society at large.

**Organization of this Volume**

Section I, Experiences of Social Identities, deals with how specific social identities are experienced and understood, with a focus on ways that expand the scope of the sorts of things that count as social identities.

In chapter 1,Social Identities in the Modern Society of the Spectacle, Casey Rentmeester looks to Charles Taylor and Guy Debord in order to evaluate how contemporary iterations of societal spectacle, including social media, influence identity formation for modern persons. Rentmeester utilizes Taylor’s narrative of the evolution of identity from premodernity into modernity alongside his notion of genuine dialog to offer a potential escape from the bind articulated by Debord. Namely, that it is impossible to escape the society of the spectacle and its false, fragmented versions of reality peddled by the various media. Rentmeester, then, argues for the possibility of social identity grounded in our relationships to others.

In chapter 2, Exhaustion, Scars, and Inheritance: An Embodied Approach to Social Class, Emmerson Bodde uses the work of Linda Alcoff to argue that class be understood as a “real social identity.” That is, a social identity that is bodily, hermeneutic, and historically shaped. Drawing a parallel with Alcoff’s analysis of gender, Bodde argues that class is “real” and “embodied,” and that work and its effect upon the embodied subject anchors the social category of class as an underdetermined element for a social identity. Work, then, is a subjectivity-forming phenomenon. Bodde concludes by suggesting that a fully sufficient elaboration of social class as a real social identity must be supplemented by an account of society and the reproduction of such identities over time.

In the last chapter of section I,Vulnerability as a driver for social identities, Fabio Macioce makes the case that vulnerability can constitute and be used to identify social groups through the opportunities they have or lack for entering the public sphere. Macioce addresses three different hypotheses for the construction of group identity that treat vulnerability as not merely an anthropological or contingent condition of persons or groups but as an element for the construction of the identity of social groups. Whether a group is identified legislators or Courts as being vulnerable, or rendered vulnerable as a consequence of the systemic oppression, or if vulnerability is a result of contingently shared traits that make up a group, such vulnerability can be taken up by group members in the struggle to be heard.

In section II, Horizons of Social Identities, the volume shifts its focus toward understanding the development of social identities in how they change and alter us over time as we have new experiences that do more than change things about us, but that might change who are in the deeper sense of altering our identity.

In chapter 4**,** Everything I Could Have Been: Epistemic-Existential Injustice, Saray

Ayala-Lopez asks the question, What could have we been, had we lived surrounded by a richer existential landscape? In answering that question, Ayala-Lopez draws on literature in social epistemology to illustrate how integral proper conceptual resources are for constructing our identities. The resources that we either have available to us or that are denied are a result of the social world, meaning that to be denied the conceptual resources needed to understand ourselves, both individually and communally, constitutes a hybrid form injustice, both epistemic and existential that prevents us from becoming what we could have been otherwise.

In chapter 5, Against the Celebration of Bravery: Towards a New Feminist Vocabulary, Mridula Sharma critiques the deployment of the language of bravery when it comes to physical and sexual violence against women. Drawing on examples from India and Iran, Sharma argues that emphasizing women’s bravery in instances of existing or expected violence is both an ontic injustice as well as an obstacle for feminist change.

David Friedell takes up the metaphysics and normativity of Jewish identity in chapter 6. Becoming Non-Jewish asks, “Can a Jewish person become non-Jewish?” and “What is Jewishness?” Highlighting the ambiguity inherent in the concept of “Jewish” Friedell outlines five possible meanings. Arguing that the answers to the questions are different depending on the meaning used, the essay explains reasons for and against staying in the Jewish community and in doing so highlights a tension, rather than telling anyone how they should identify.

Lastly, Section III, Some Frameworks of Social Identities, explores some frameworks for understanding what social identities are besides the most commonly known, that is, some versions of essentialism and mainstream accounts of social constructionism. These frameworks offer ways of thinking about social identities that mark trends in contemporary thinking and, in doing so, they entail methodologies that can best illuminate them.

Johnathan Flowers looks to John Dewey in chapter 7 to articulate an account of identity. In John Dewey’s Pragmatist Social Ontology Account of Identity Flowers outlines the social ontology of identity that Dewey develops in several texts. Highlighting how identity and personhood are cultural achievements that emerge through the interaction and transactions between the environment and the human organism. As such, identity is not static but produced over time through habit. The chapter closes with a consideration of gendering from a Deweyan perspective.

The volume closes with Ana Đorđević’s essay, Social Identification as Representation, Construction, or Subjective Experience: Ontological Frictions in Psychology and Lessons from Social Ontology. The chapter offers a critical examination of two views of social identity in psychology, those that focus on the individual, cognitivist components, and those in the social constructionist and discursive theory fields that theorize the social and cultural components of social identities. Đorđević argues that none of these views offers an account of the subjective character of experience, surprisingly as it sounds, and that none offers an integrated account of social identities. In her view, psychology can benefit from critically analyzing the ontological presumptions of its theorizing, engaging with questions that appear in the social ontological literature (the significance of affect and subjective experience, the group as a plural subject and a foundation for social identification, collective intentionality, and agency, as well as the ambiguity between collectivity and individuality), thereby improving the theoretical basis of the empirical research that is central to the discipline.

The broad range of essays that comprise the volume bring a diversity of ideas and perspectives to the table, and that do justice to the richness that inquiries into social identities require. We feel that this approach to social identity makes for an engaging and generative collection that criss-crosses the boundaries of the traditional areas of philosophy and shows some of the possibilities of this type of ontological and epistemological work connecting with topics in ethics, and social and political philosophy. This collection is, then, in an important sense aspirational. It is our hope that this volume shows different ways of approaching social identities and, in doing so, invites others to theorize social identities anew.

**References**

Arango, Alejandro & Adam Burgos. Neither Race nor Ethnicity: Latinidad as a Social Affordance (with Alejandro Arango). *Journal of Social Philosophy*. Online first, December 16, 2022.

Arango, Alejandro & Adam Burgos. The Social Identity Affordance View: A Theory of Social Identities (with Alejandro Arango). *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*. Online first: October 2, 2023.

Lawson, Tony. 2014. “A Conception of Social Ontology.” *Social Ontology and Modern Economics*, edited by Stephen Pratten. New York: Routledge.

Mills, Charles W. 1998. Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Weichold, Martin, and Gerhard Thonhauser. 2020. “Collective Affordances.” Ecological Psychology 32(1): 1–24.