

# University of Kent sociologist Frank Furedi: Interpreting society through psychology gave rise to the identity crisis

EXCLUSIVE



Frank Furedi is a Hungarian-Canadian academic, emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK, and author of '100 Years of Identity Crisis: Culture War Over Socialisation', published by De Gruyter in 2021.

Given these threads of your answers, I'm tempted to say that your book, in a way, is an historical account of the genesis of psychology, rather than identity crisis. Does that sound like a fair description?

Well, they're intertwined. Because psychology plays a critical role in the framing of identity crisis, whereas the language of psychology shapes the way that people behave, particularly in Western societies, particularly in Anglo-American societies. They provide a language through which people's understanding of themselves and of others is often informed. So yes, identity crisis is really the way that psychology emerges as the principal medium through which society is interpreted and understood. And it displaces theology, it displaces philosophy, and it displaces all these other ways of making sense of the world and attains ascendancy more and more in the 19th and the 1950s onwards.

OK, so I understand that psychology provided, to use your words, "a frame and a language" for identity at the dawn of the 20th century. But what made the people susceptible to psychology to accept it instead of philosophy and other sources of identity that were going on for hundreds of years?

I think it's when you have that kind of disruption in the way that generations are socialized, and when they haven't got a clear, external narrative, through which they can make their sense of the world. There's obviously a demand for meaning. People are demanding: They want to know who they are, what their place is in the world, and why they feel the way they do. And I think psychology becomes very useful at that point, in terms of giving you an answer to that. And with the passing of time, as those trends we're discussing strengthen, the demand for psychology expands and the psychology then becomes this extremely powerful institution essentially for turning problems that used to be called social or political problems into psychological ones.

You also make a case that the loss of the moral authority played into this identity crisis that we are right now witnessing. Could you please give a brief account of that loss?

Well, I think that moral authority is really quite important, because people need guidance on what is good and bad, and what is right and wrong. They need to know what kind of values they should internalize or engage with, as they make their way in the world. When you have all the religious and political institutions gradually becoming less and less confident of themselves, increasingly their capacity to be authoritative becomes weaker and weaker. And you saw that very clearly, by the time we get to the 1960s, where essentially any form of moral authority was conspicuously absent. Under those circumstances, you do have a peculiar lack of guidance, which is most importantly summed up by the fact that making judgments or judgment was increasingly seen as something that was wrong, rather than as necessary for the conduct of public life.

OK, so to what extent, if any, the process of secularization played into this loss of the moral authority?

Everybody argues that it does, and there is a very clear connection with that. I think that obviously the decline of religion, or even the decline of authority which kicks in in the West with the Protestant Reformation, when Luther comes along and challenges the unquestioned authority of the Pope, I think from that point onwards, religious authority became essentially shattered in the West. Not in your country, not in other places, but it's essentially shattered. And then you have a quest for authority, that is, what is authority going to be based on? Is it going to be the authority of science? Is it going to be authority of charisma? Is it going to be the authority of public opinion? Or democracy and popular sovereignty? Finding an answer to that question has been one of the most important focus of conflict, often unacknowledged,

in the centuries since in Western societies. It seems to me that the problem is not secularization, but the fact that the one source of authority, which you could viably rely on in the absence of the old, is that of popular sovereignty and democracy. And despite the fact that Western societies claim to love democracy, I think their love of democracy is extremely pragmatic and instrumental, rather than having any real depth to it.

That was interesting. What about science? At least at certain points, some people believed or hoped that science will provide an alternative source of authority for everything, including the moral authority.

Absolutely. And that's what I talked about in the book quite a lot. There have been different attempts to do that, and that continues to this day. But I argue that science by itself, does not have the moral depth to inspire and motivate people. It doesn't really work that well. And for that reason, science always needs something else. You find that in the contemporary world very often that a kind of scientific technocratic outlook tries to come together with identity politics, to create a relational symbiosis. The scientists have their source of authority come into its own in certain limited circumstances, like the COVID pandemic. But by and large, it's too cold, and it's too far from people, to be able to play that kind of authoritative guiding role.

Q: The case of COVID put the science back on its throne, even if only temporarily. But in recent decades, in 21st century, we have seen anti-scientific movements on the rise. I wouldn't say Trump, for example, is anti-science, but the whole movement, as an example, was somehow biased against the authority of the science. So why are people turning against science? Not just saying, "Okay, you're too cold to become authority"; rather, they are denying any authority of science.

I think people do that because science has been used inappropriately, and has been politicized. So in the pandemic, it's one thing for the science to explain its understanding of the virus. It's another thing for scientists to dictate policy about how to behave in public and what to do. That's that's a job for politicians, not for scientists. And I think it's the attempt to erode the line and the boundary between scientific authority and political authority that has led to a reaction. Which I think is a good reaction in many ways, and sometimes a bad reaction. However, it's a reaction against not so much to science, but to scientism, which is the attempt to turn a science into a political ideology.

What perhaps puts much of what happened later into context is the Cultural Turn in the late 20th century. How did that come into being? The Cultural Turn occurs in the 1970s. It's something that coincides with the decline of political ideologies, when communism and socialism and liberalism and conservatism are all in crisis. And it's at that point that increasingly, culture becomes the medium through which issues and problems that beforehand were seen as political or economic, are made sense of and interpreted. So culture becomes everything from that point onwards.

Here is my final question. Do you see any prospect of this identity crisis coming to an end in maybe the near future?

I think it's going to get worse and worse. I think we're at a point at which it could easily turn into a kind of heightened dark-age where people got so obsessed with their identity that they lose sight of any kind of solidarity. So a lot of people always tell me, "Well, Frank, when it's going to end?", hoping that I would say, next week or next month. But I think there's room for a very, very long haul in relation to this.

So we have to learn to live with this crisis of identity. Or challenge it.

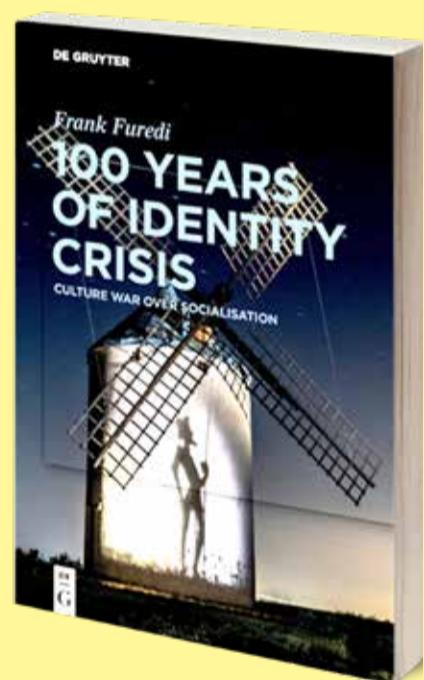
CONCLUDED

2  
PART

About the book:

**100 Years of Identity Crisis**

The concept of Identity Crisis came into usage in the 1940s and it has continued to dominate the cultural zeitgeist ever since. In his exploration of the historical origins of this development, Frank Furedi argues that the principal driver of the 'crisis of identity' was and continues to be the conflict surrounding the socialisation of young people. In turn, the politicisation of this conflict provides a terrain on which the Culture Wars and the politicisation of identity can flourish. Through exploring the interaction between the problems of socialisation and identity, this study offers a unique account of the origins and rise of the Culture Wars.



midjourney.com



midjourney.com