

Identity Politics Then and Now

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Identity politics, or collective activism based on embodied experiences of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity or nationality, existed before the late twentieth century, but the term was coined in the 1970s and widely circulated in the 1980s as a response to social injustice, widespread prejudice and even assault borne by members of specific minority groups. For lesbians, gays and transsexuals, for ethnic minorities like Native Americans in the US or First Nations in Canada, for women in many Western countries, identity politics has meant working proactively for full legal and social recognition. Feminism often flies under the banner of identity politics with the argument that gender equality is still far from the norm in Western societies and even less so in many Asian and African societies, and in those of the Arab world.

In the 1990s, however, queer theorists and other post-structuralists in the West denounced identity politics as that which turns identity into essence, a changeless truth about the self. With its root in the Latin *idem* or ‘same’, identity is a description or narrative that one understands as ‘self-same’, the same as oneself. Identity, post-structuralists argue, is a construction of language, a necessary construction perhaps, but not an essence or a changeless truth.¹ A politics based on identity, they argue, is far too narrow; it ignores the divisions of subjectivity, the unknowable aspects of consciousness, the vagaries and uncertainties of desire. Worse, identitarian thinking mimics the simplistic habits of mind of the oppressors – of those who persecute on the basis of identity, who generalize about the whole person on the basis of characteristics or behaviours, or who refuse to tolerate difference among and within persons. Further, identity stories, however interpersonal, affirm capitalism’s fetish and engine: the privatized subject. In global capital circuits, corporations are happy to use ‘identity’ as a brand to exoticize their goods (‘United Colors of Benetton’ ads are still going strong).² Groups consumed with proclaiming their identity blindside other seemingly less personal issues, like poverty, war and injustices suffered by others. Identity politics, in this view, paralyzes as much as it liberates.

Still, one might insist that identity politics generates a necessary counter to oppression. People across the world are still being beaten and sometimes killed because they are gay, black or an ethnic minority, or belong to a particular religion, or, to take a more recent violent trend, because they are undocumented. In other words, identity politics at its most powerful is about survival and resistance. I count myself a feminist of a post-structuralist persuasion, yet I tell my students that if identity never sums up the complexity of an individual, a group, or a historical conjuncture, identity politics is what

gets us into the streets to express defiance and solidarity. Regardless of what one thinks of marriage, it was a seismic shift in the cultural politics of the US when the legislature of New York State, the largest state to do so, passed a law in June 2011 legalizing gay marriage. Behind this decision was nothing less than identity politics, gay citizens and their supporters advocating as a group for decades to give people who identify as gay the right to legal marriage. During the Egyptian iteration of the ‘Arab Spring’, when Tahrir Square came to mark civil defiance, one heard again and again, ‘today I am proud to be an Egyptian’, meaning, at least at the moment, one who is joining like-minded others to build a democratic society after decades of autocratic rule.

It is worth reviewing one of the foundational documents of identity politics in the US: the Combahee River Collective’s ‘Black Feminist Statement’, published in 1977. Conceived to protest racism in the predominantly white women’s movement and the persistent sexism and homophobia of male leaders in black liberation struggles, the Statement is conceptually complex. Feminism, the Collective writes, is not an identity but a mode of action: ‘the political analysis and practice that we women use to struggle against our oppression’.³ That struggle was first defined through consciousness-raising in which social and psychic limitations – the need to be ‘ladylike’, to be ‘less objectionable in the eyes of white people’ and later to resist ‘the threat of physical and sexual abuse by men’ – were understood as common experiences, the bases on which to ‘build a politics’.⁴ They realized, long before Foucault, that identity may produce a kind of ‘care of the self’ – acts, initiated by the self in concert with those who support her, that lead to transformation, even happiness.

*‘The most profound and politically most radical politics come directly out of our own identity’.*⁵ In one sense this statement epitomizes essentialism. Identity is posited as a truthful origin from which all action springs. Identity provides the ‘I’ with attributes that are the *same* as that of the group. In identity politics those identifying attributes are collectively claimed for everyone. And yet the Statement repeatedly intercalates sexuality, class and race and recognizes the importance of coalitions with different groups. A politics based on identity requires acts of affiliation and the labour of consciousness-raising to understand and enact them. Identity, the Collective tells us, is not a birthright, but rather a set of meanings and positions that are achieved and, by implication, may shift over time.

Theatre is the cultural practice most concerned with the identity questions: ‘who am I?’ ‘Who are they?’ It is in the nature of representation, most clearly exemplified by realism, to invoke a hidden truth and for spectators to enjoy its disclosure. In popular culture forms like melodrama, identity equals that hidden truth, as it does, more ambiguously, in drama from Ibsen’s *A Doll House* (1879) to Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour* (1934), to Marsha Norman’s *Getting Out* (1977), to Sarah Daniels’s *Masterpieces* (1983). Yet theatre overlays ontology (who one *is*) with action (what one *does*), and, by its very nature, puts identity in play. One of the great feminist plays of the 1970s, Simone Benmussa’s *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs*, dramatizes the reality and irreality of identity.⁶ ‘Albert Nobbs’ is an invention of the female protagonist, who crossdresses as a waiter to make money and then simply continues as a man. With its formal mediations – its voice-overs, flashbacks and Benmussa’s subtle *mises en scène* – the audience understands better

than Albert both the utter performativity of gender identity and the torment of sexual longing. In the late 1970s and the 1980s, feminist and drag performers in the US and the UK – Hot Peaches, Bloodlips, Split Britches, Five Lesbian Brothers, among many others – swatted away Albert’s gloom and confusion, mocking gender identity as a straitjacket that no one should be forced to wear. With witty cabaret-style parody and sharp satire these groups exuberantly exploded sexual norms with the serious intention of creating a liberated social space, of pleasuring an audience that yearned for social change.

And now? Recent plays, such as Caryl Churchill’s *Far Away* (2000) and *A Number* (2002) and Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Fuckin’ A* (2001) are, as it were, post-identity, with characters in quasi-mimetic settings yet nearly devoid of identity markers – the (illusion of) interiority audiences once expected of theatre characters. Yet the hunger for the truth of identity continues in different kinds of verbatim theatre that are based on interviews about racial or homophobic violence, from Anna Deavere Smith’s *Fires in the Mirror* (1992, pub. 1993) and *Twilight Los Angeles* (1992) to Moisés Kaufman’s *The Laramie Project* (2002), to Lynn Nottage’s *Ruined* (2008). In such works, oppositional politics, the kind fuelling identity politics, is replaced by feelings of loss, healing and hope, perhaps auguring and reflecting our current critical absorption in affect. Affect theory deflects attention from normative political discourse and action to the physical fact of permeable bodies and circulating feelings.

Identity, with respect to this theorizing, becomes one more ideology to sideline or transcend. Are we now making a fetish of affect, the way earlier groups made a fetish of identity? Let me close with Peggy Shaw’s recent *Must: The Inside Story* (2008), where a lesbian body and butch identity are in full view, carrying on traditions from the 1970s and 1980s, but where politics emerges from that body’s identification with a poisoned suffering planet: when Shaw’s skin ‘cracks open’ we find ‘New York City sexshops and garbage’ or a ‘toxic plastic mass’.⁷ Shaw points the way towards a renovated identity politics, lodged in the body’s affective connection with others yet still rooted in political commitment and oppositional rage.

NOTES

- 1 For related discussions, see Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 145–55 ff.; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 1–34, 142–9; Gayatri Spivak on ‘strategic essentialism’ discussed in *The Spivak Reader*, ed. D. Landry (London: Taylor and Francis, 1995), pp. 214 ff.; and Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays of Feminism and Theater* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 106–9 ff.
- 2 See Henry Giroux, ‘Consuming Social Change: “The United Colors of Benetton”’, *Cultural Critique*, 26 (Winter 1993–4), pp. 5–32.
- 3 The Combahee River Collective, ‘A Black Feminist Statement’, in Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith, eds., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave* (New York: Feminist Press, 1982), p. 15.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Hull, Scott and Smith, *All the Women . . .*, p. 16, my italics.
- 6 Simone Benmussa, *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs (La Vie Sigulière d’Albert Nobbs*, Editions des femmes, 1977) in *Benmussa Directs* (London: John Calder, 1979), pp. 22–6, 75–121.

- 7 Peggy Shaw and Suzy Willson, *Must: The Inside Story (a Journey through the Shadows of a City, A Pound of Flesh, a Book of Love, 2008)*, a spiral-bound, illustrated, privately published, unpaginated text, divided into eleven sections. These words are from section 1.

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