The Identity in *Question*

Edited and with an Introduction by

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Stanley Aronowitz
Etienne Balibar
Homi Bhabha
Wendy Brown
Judith Butler
Andreas Huyssen
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PART II ELABORATIONS

Introduction

This volume grew out of a symposium held in New York in 1991, at the height of a wave of debate in America over two phenomena, which then seemed inseparable from one another: "multiculturalism" and "political correctness." The aftermath of this debate is still very much with us. Two of the writers highlighted by Homi Bhabha in his contribution, Derek Walcott and Toni Morrison, have gone on to receive Nobel Prizes. Terms of the day, such as "diversity" and "sensitivity to difference," have now entered the language, together with their familiar legal and political purports. Yet many questions or difficulties, conceptual and political, raised by this debate remain unsettled. And it was precisely the experiment of this symposium to bring these sorts of questions out into open public exchange, and so to initiate a critical examination of how the problems and objectives had been framed, the meanings determined, the categories fixed.

For at this time "the public" already enjoyed an important role in the controversy—a very American sort of role. The debate had become a mass-mediatized pastime, the new topic of talk shows and T-shirts, bringing unaccustomed notoriety and fortune to certain academic authors. Multiculturalism had become a fad and a style, and everyone knew what to think about it. Indeed it seemed that we were living in a new, monolithic *culture* of multiculturalism. And yet all this "publicity" had tended to obscure the

more difficult questions, to cover over an unspoken diversity in approach, concern and analysis, to discourage singular creative efforts—in short to reduce or smooth over complications and differences. Even the key word, "multiculturalism," came to cover quite different ideas and practices, which a critical reflection or a creative practice might want to separate, or reassemble in other ways. The symposium was an attempt to make public such diversity and such possibility behind the mediatized homogenization of the terms in which the debate was being carried on, so as to better diagnose what was really at stake, to better define the nature of the *politics* at issue. It was an attempt to introduce some *movement* into the concepts at work—concepts like "culture," "identity" and "plurality," which themselves had had a particularly resonant history in America. To this end, the symposium assembled a small group of people engaged in the debate in different fields and countries to take part in a public encounter. The edited outcome of this experiment comprises Part I of this volume. Part II includes longer and more elaborate discussions from those who were invited to participate but who, for one reason or another, did not.

A number of lines of questioning emerged in the free-flowing debate of Part I. Joan Scott tackled the conservative and neoconservative campaign against the whole multicultural phenomenon, and tried to distinguish its politics from liberalism. But in the discussion that followed, there arose a clash in viewpoints that further complicated matters. Chantal Mouffe raised the problem of the heritage of liberal pluralism in a different light; and in a fine, conceptual analysis, Ernesto Laclau tried to show how universality and particularity figured in the new vantage point. Cornel West introduced his distinctive brand of "tragic" pragmatism, in which suffering bodies compete for the resources to weave hopeful webs of meaning. His pragmatism found one prolongation in Stanley Aronowitz's attempt to bring back George Herbert Mead. In Aronowitz's view, the identities which are formed in social movements (or which require social movements to be formed) are not only many-sided, but are also politically "heteronomous." Minority identity is thus not only tragic and hopeful; it also becomes problematizing when it mobilizes something "other"—something which cannot be assimilated within visible, established, public categories, and which causes them to be rethought.

This theme of the heteronomous character of identity in social movements was elaborated in another way by Jacques Rancière. It had emerged

in the course of his study of how the very name "worker" functioned in the French workers' movement, how it became the name of something "other," inseparable from the political process of "subjectivization" which the movement itself sought to introduce into society. In this way, Rancière raised the problem of such problematic identities in *history*—the problem of the *kind* of history which can be transformed by the "movement" of heteronomous subjectivizations. In this case, history is more than context or tradition. Rather, context and tradition are something like the negative conditions for the attempt to set into motion something as yet unconceived or unnamed, which opens society to a transformation whose outcome is unforeseen—conditions for a sort of experiment. The potential for such movement and critical experimentation within society shows that history is not linear or progressive, any more than it is circular or cyclical. It shows that if history is a "web," it is one with many gaps and holes which allow it to be constantly rewoven in other ways, and that it thus always carries with it the sort of "in-between" times and spaces to which Homi Bhabha draws attention in postcolonial writing. Thus one can see minority not as a given, monolithic, traditional identity, but rather as a multiple, unpredictable force which comes out from the *intervals* of official memory to problematize and recompose traditions. And while traditional liberalism has the honor of defending the rights of minorities, it has been much less able to understand the violence of this sort of alterity, this sort of movement.

Together with Rancière, Andreas Huyssen introduced a European perspective into the discussion. He raised the question of German nationalism, and so of nationalism itself, and the negative attitudes to it traditionally on the Left. He thus indirectly raised the question of the "complex" of amnesia and mourning that the debacle of such nationalism left in Europe, and particularly in Germany. It was a useful reminder. For there is a sense in which our current notions of "multiculturalism" are as peculiarly American as were our earlier ideas of pluralism. In response to some insistent questioning from the floor, some participants started to worry that there were too many Europeans in this American symposium, furthering a "hegemony on the level of knowledge." But questions of "cultural identity" and nationalism have since exploded with tragic fatality and unspeakable brutality in Europe, and "multicultural" America has remained rather indifferent to this fact. And, as Chantal Mouffe remarked in the discussion, it is often those with this type of "European experience" who today are the most sympa-

thetic to American pluralism, the most puzzled by its blanket rejection by some on the American Left. Yet no one, European or American (or other), was unreservedly satisfied with such pluralism, even if there was no consensus on the alternatives to it, or on the manner in which contemporary questions of identity serve to complicate or rethink it. Thus Rancière captured a common concern when he declared that we must *reinvent* politics today. For there is something in the nature of power and of "the political" which traditional pluralism fails to understand, and which current multiculturalism seems to bring to the fore: what would a democracy be which allows for the unpredictable movement of those unnamed "others" within, without, or "in-between" that would serve to transform the very idea of who comprises it, and therefore, of what it is and can do?

A central feature of multiculturalist talk in America that enjoyed much less currency in this symposium is to be found in the ubiquitous, but often unanalyzed, term of *culture*. The more elaborate essays in Part II help explain why. It is remarkable that the current American discussion of "difference" is couched in the terms of a widespread culturalism, such that to untangle what is being said about identity is to understand to what sort of "culture" appeal is being made. Thus, when Cornel West uses the term in introducing "the new cultural politics of difference," he is content to leave it somewhat unexplained in a pragmatic way. A more detailed and more critical view is offered by Fredric Jameson, in his elaborate look at "the desire called 'cultural studies' " in America. Jameson finds that the new emphasis on culture has come at the expense of the larger sense of history and politics one finds in the Marxist tradition.

In a lecture first presented at UNESCO, Etienne Balibar goes further; he tries to critically dissect the very idea of "cultural identity," arguing that what is discussed under this heading might be better formulated in terms of the relation between subjects and historical institutions. In the analysis of such relations, he contends, psychoanalysis has an important role to play, since there is no racism that does not include some form of sexism. Thus Balibar distinguishes different kinds of identification. He refers to Jean-Claude Milner's reading of Lacan's categories in terms of the logical problem of the assemblage of elements into groups; thus one may talk of "symbolic" identities, "imaginary" ones and, finally, "paradoxical" ones, which Milner thinks always emerge in the course of a psychoanalysis. It is the last category, associated with what Lacan called "the real," which perhaps offers the psychoan-

alyst's most original contribution to the question of identity. In referring to it, Balibar thus touches on a problem pursued by Wendy Brown and Judith Butler in their essays. They are concerned with two seemingly opposed theoretical perspectives that have been influential when questions of sex and sexuality have been raised in the "new cultural politics of difference" in America—one coming from Nietzsche and Foucault, the other from Freud and Lacan. And perhaps the "paradoxical" kind of identity linked to what Lacan called "the real" is just the kind which Foucault urged that we make the object of the critical historical experimentation which problematizes and opens our "cultures" to new possibilities, new subjectivies.

In its two parts, this volume is thus an attempt to introduce a certain critical "diversity" into the very concept of multiculturalism and the uniform mediatized way in which it has come to be served up to us in America. The aim is not to represent all viewpoints, and no doubt there are many other ways to take up this endeavor. For the point of the experiment was not to be all-inclusive, or to propound an overarching viewpoint; it was to initiate a critical activity to be taken up by others elsewhere, in different ways. It was to this end that I prepared a series of questions that were sent to all the participants in 1990; I have reproduced them here.

The Identity in Question: The central aim of this symposium is to problematize and to complicate the very terms of the debate over multiculturalism and political correctness: "culture," "identity," "representation," "power," "experience," and so forth, formulating thereby new questions or raising old ones in new ways. What is at stake is the nature of political community and what it can be for us today. A (nonexhaustive) list of issues to be addressed includes:

1. Universality Do there exist values, principles or objectives that transcend all particular identifications, and to which all particular oppressed or disadvantaged groups can, or must, appeal? Need such appeals postulate fixed rules or formal procedures derived from a foundational philosophy of humanity or reason, and what relation would they have to the particularities of the "identity" or "culture" of the various groups? Does or can there exist such a thing as a universal "culture," or only the particular ones that secure the identities of groups? What is universality, what is particularity, and what is the relation between the two?

2. Agency Does the erosion of, or skepticism about, the great progressivist or teleological, social-historical models and Utopias of the last century allow for any form of political organization other than that of the "empowerment" of particular groups? What would be the nature of a collective "agency" which did not require those models or Utopias, or which would rethink them along new lines? After the model of the self-consciousness of progress in a party, what is political "agency"?

3. Liberalism What role should "liberal" values of the rule of law, the claims to rights, and equal opportunities play in the politics of minority "empowerment"? Does the old liberal consensus, or its revivals, entail a "depoliticization"? What relation does, or should, it have to the struggle for "power" on the part of minorities? What is power; what is "the political"?

4. Plurality Is society, or political community, irreducibly plural, or "dispersed" in nature? Or does there, rather, exist some systemic organization, the analysis of which might unify the community and its struggles? Is such "plurality" or "diversity" to be understood as a group of tribes each with its own "cultural identity," or is there a more radical type of "plurality" or "multiplicity" prior to existing classifications, that would involve the political temporality of those "in-between" such groups, those with "hybrid" identifications, or simply those identifying with no one group? What is "diversity"?

5. Nationality In the wake of the end of the settlement of the great European War of Nations, does there exist, outside the Marxist treatment of the nationality question and the Leninist doctrine of imperialism, a conception of citizenship which is not *de facto* defined in terms of nation-states? Does there exist another political solution to the question of minority than that of the egalitarian or republican law of particular nations, or the Romantic notion that each people must have its state? After the Cold War, what are nationality and nationalism?

6. Avant-garde Does the mainstream absorption of the great movements of cultural modernism entail that there can, or should, no longer exist a dissident art other than an art of subcultural empowerment, with its concomitant embrace of mass and artisanal cultural forms? What is the "politics" of art, and of its forms?

7. Alterity Does it make sense to speak of an "Other" whose logic would not be one of contrast or opposition (as in the idea of the "non-Western")—something "other to" identity, rather than an "other identity"; something which, therefore, no group (not even a "non-Western" one) may be said to "represent"? What or who is "the Other"?

8. Subjectivity Does the question of the subject (as distinct from that of the individual) raised by psychoanalysis and by Lacan introduce a "politics of identity" that is distinct from and even opposed to a "politics of identification" with a culture, tribe, nation, way of life, community (and notably the type of identification Freud analyzed in the church and the army)? What is the relation of identity to "sexuality"? Is it a matter of the "culture" of sexual minorities, their "self-esteem" and their "empowerment"? Or is the assertion of "proper" or unproblematic identity itself the symptom of a fundamental anxiety, a fundamental "discontent" in civilization, that is unleashed in "modernity"? What is the relation of the "subjectivity" or "spirituality" of desire to the political?

9. Methodology Do minority studies require methods appropriate to each group, and irreducible to those of more traditional disciplines such as history, social science and literary or art criticism? Is each group methodologically obliged to have its own historians, its own critics, its own intellectuals? Are "women's studies" or "African-American studies," beyond the study of women or African-Americans, particular *kinds* of study, characterized by their own particular procedures or styles of analysis, inference and explanation? In particular, what relation do minority studies have to those methods or types of analysis credited with being the achievements of "Western Civilization"? Is there, and should there be, such a thing as "methodological separatism"?

10. Theory Is all theory, if not all knowledge, necessarily "ethnocentric"? Is truth or objectivity something more or different from solidarity with one's tribe? Is the historical contextualization of knowledge or theory of this tribal sort? Are claims or appeals to universality really only a matter of Western, European tribalism? Can one speak from any other position than one's own "subject position" or one's own "site"? What is "critical theory," what sort of truth claims does it make, and to whom is it addressed?

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The Identity in Question

DEBATE

Joan W. Scott

Multiculturalism and the Politics of Identity

If there were any doubt that the production of knowledge is a political enterprise that involves a contest among conflicting interests, the raging debates of the last few years should have dispelled them. What counts as knowledge? Who gets to define what counts as knowledge? These are difficult problems, never easy to resolve, but it is the function of teachers and scholars to grapple with them.

Those who deny the existence of these problems and who would suppress discussion of them are not without their politics; they simply promote their orthodoxy in the name of an unquestioned and unquestionable tradition, universality or history. They attack challenges to their ideas as dangerous and subversive, antithetical to the academic enterprise. They offer themselves as apostles of timeless truths, when in fact they are enemies of change. The cry that politics has recently invaded the university, imported by sixties radicals, is an example of the defense of orthodoxy; it is itself a political attempt to distract attention from the fact that there are serious issues at stake and more than one valid side to the story in the current debates about knowledge.

What we are witnessing these days is not simply a set of internal debates about what schools and universities should teach and what students should learn. Journalists and politicians have joined the fray and added a new

dimension to it. There is much more at stake in their campaign against "political correctness" than a concern with excessive moralism, affirmative action and freedom of speech in the academy. Rather, the entire enterprise of the university has come under attack, and with it the aspect that intellectuals most value and that the humanities most typically represent: a critical, skeptical approach to all that a society takes most for granted.

The far-ranging investigations of university practices—curricular change, admissions standards, financial aid, fellowship awards, disciplinary codes, hiring and tenure procedures, teaching loads, time spent on research, accreditation standards, even, I would argue, the investigation of the misuse of overhead funds—are all attempts to delegitimize the philosophical and institutional bases from which social and cultural criticism have traditionally come. We are experiencing another phase of the ongoing Reagan-Bush revolution which, having packed the courts and privatized the economy, now seeks to neutralize the space of ideological and cultural nonconformity by discrediting it. This is the context within which debates about political correctness and multiculturalism have taken shape.

"Political correctness" is the label that has been attached to any program or position that attacks or calls into question the status quo. Coined by the Left as an internal criticism of moralizing dogmatisms, the term has been seized by the Right and used to disqualify all critical efforts. It seems to be working so well as a form of intimidation that it became a theme in the Bush presidential campaign for 1992. Demands for change in the name of tolerance, fairness and justice are, under the "P.C." label, described as dangerous orthodoxies, attempts to impose thought control on otherwise benign individuals. In the name of defending the individual's right to think and act as he pleases, the conservative ideologists protect existing structures and practices from all critical scrutiny and even moderate attempts at reform.

If "political correctness" is the label attached to critical attitudes and behavior, "multiculturalism" is the program it is said to be attempting to enact. This project of somehow recognizing the demographic diversity that has become characteristic of many colleges, universities and urban schools has been reviled by conservatives as a dangerous orthodoxy. One writer refers to the "cult of multiculturalism," distinguishing a few reasonable proponents among a preponderance of fanatics. Another suggests that multiculturalism's "Europhobia" will undermine the unity and the com-

mon culture of the American nation. Proponents insist, on the other hand, that multiculturalism will increase both fairness (by representing the range and richness of America's different ethnicities) and tolerance (by exposing students to multiple perspectives on the meaning of history). In this view, multiculturalism pluralizes the notion of an American identity by insisting on attention to African-Americans, Native Americans and the like, but it leaves in place a unified concept of identity.

It is this unified concept of identity that informs the debate on multiculturalism. And it is the extreme polarization of sides—for and against multiculturalism, liberal pluralism or conservative individualism—that makes critical reflection on the terms of the debate so difficult. Despite its difficulty, and fully cognizant of the political risks involved, it is such a critical reflection that I want to undertake.

Within the pluralist framework that seeks to contain and resolve the debate, identity is taken as the referential sign of a fixed set of customs, practices and meanings, an enduring heritage, a readily identifiable sociological category, a set of shared traits and/or experiences. "Diversity" refers to a plurality of identities, and it is seen as a condition of human existence rather than as the effect of an enunciation of difference that constitutes hierarchies and asymmetries of power.[1] When diversity is seen as a condition of existence, the questions become whether and how much of it is useful to recognize; but the stakes people have in the answers to those questions are obscured, as are the history and politics of difference and identity itself. Without a way to theorize the history and politics of identity outside the pluralist framework, it is difficult to respond to the conservative onslaught.

Something of this can be seen in the report of the New York State Social Studies Review and Development Committee, issued last June and called "One Nation, Many Peoples: A Declaration of Cultural Interdependence." The report is an impressive document from many perspectives, and it makes a persuasive case for a multicultural curriculum, arguing, among other things, that democratic participation is enhanced when students understand that change occurs because groups pursue their interests through collective action. Pride in one's heritage is, the report suggests, an important ingredient in citizenship, particularly for those whose identities and viewpoints have been excluded or marginalized in accounts of American history. What the report does not do is conceive of difference as in any way constitutive, and so it leaves itself open to a charge delivered by Nathan Glazer (one of

the dissenting members of the committee) that ethnicities should not be treated as monolithic and unchanging because that ignores the very real history of their assimilation to "American culture." Glazer's argument, that the report's "hypostatization" of identities creates a dangerously divided reality, is eminently political; by asserting the essential unity of the identity of "American," it underplays the extent to which processes of difference and discrimination have structured (and continue to structure) American life.

By looking only at the effects of the enunciation of difference, and not at the contested process itself, both Glazer and the authors of the report naturalize identity, making it a matter of biology or history or culture, an inescapable trait that can matter more or less, but is inherently a part of one's being. The report assumes that people are discriminated against *because* they are already different, when, in fact, I would argue, it is the other way around: difference and the salience of different identities are produced by discrimination, a process that establishes the superiority or the typicality or the universality of some in terms of the inferiority or atypicality or particularity of others.

Two citations seem to me to illustrate this point. One is from Stuart Hall, whose theoretical explorations prepare us for his insight:

> The fact is "black" has never been just there either. It has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally, and politically. It, too, is a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found. People now speak of the society I come from in totally unrecognizable ways. Of course Jamaica is a black society, they say. In reality it is a society of black and brown people who lived for three or four hundred years without ever being able to speak of themselves as "black." Black is an identity which had to be learned and could only be learned in a certain moment. In Jamaica that moment is the 1970s.[2]

The second quote is from someone whose insight we might attribute to "experience" (as long as we understood experience to be discursively mediated). A white, middle-class student, living in a Latino dormitory at Stanford, told a *New York Times* reporter what she had come to understand about her identity:

> "Sometimes I'd get confused," she said because she never knew when a simple comment she made would offend someone else. She finally appreciated the difference between herself and the Hispanic students when one of them asked her what it felt like to be an Anglo. "I'd never heard anyone use the word Anglo for me before. . . . Where I came from no one was Anglo; everyone was just Irish Catholic. But after being [here] a while I realized that an Anglo can be an Anglo only if there's someone who's not."[3]

Most discussions of multiculturalism avoid this kind of insight about the production of knowledge of identity, and therefore undercut their most radical potential. It may be precisely because they wanted to avoid appearing too radical that the authors of the New York State report assumed that identity groups preexisted rather than followed from discrimination; it may also be that to have historicized the question of identity would have antagonized a significant and vociferous minority constituency, one invested in establishing its autonomous and unified historical existence. (Support for this argument might come from the curious absence of attention to gender in the report and from the committee's contorted apology about it at the end:

> We were repeatedly cautioned to avoid letting issues related to sex-role differences come to dominate the work of this Committee. We were reminded that, too often, when matters of cultural, ethnic, and language biases are addressed and attention is called to the importance of sex-role differences and sexism, the sexism question dominates discussion and action. Thus we treated sex-role groupings as contexts for the development of culture-like consistencies. (draft version, p. 68)

The paragraph goes on to acknowledge the "double and even triple" burden carried by women in "low status" cultural groups (as if such an acknowledgment in the report could compensate for the exclusion of attention to gender and sexuality in the proposed curriculum). Whatever the explanation—and I suspect many factors were at work—the result leaves the discussion safely within a liberal pluralist framework, and makes eminently plausible the objection of another of the dissenters on the committee,

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., that in the proposed curriculum there was too much emphasis on the "*pluribus*" and not enough on the "*unum*."

The alternative strategy—to historicize the question of identity—is to introduce an analysis of its production, and thus an analysis of constructions of and conflicts about power; it is also, of course, to call into question the autonomy and stability of any particular identity as it claims to define and interpret a subject's existence. Oddly enough, given the charges of incoherence and anarchy made against multicultural approaches, historicizing the question of identity also offers the possibility of a more unified view than that of the liberal pluralists. Here is S. P. Mohanty, taking up an argument made by Cornel West against a notion of separate canons, of new canons entirely replacing old:

> How do we negotiate between my history and yours? How would it be possible for us to recover our commonality, not the ambiguous imperial-humanist myth of our shared human attributes, which are supposed to distinguish us from animals, but, more significantly, the imbrication of our various pasts and presents, the ineluctable relationships of shared and contested meanings, values, and material resources? It is necessary to assert our dense particularities, our lived and imagined differences; but could we afford to leave untheorized the question of how our differences are intertwined and, indeed, hierarchically organized? Could we, in other words, afford to have *entirely* different histories, to see ourselves as living—and having lived—in entirely heterogeneous and discrete spaces?[4]

His answer is obviously no. Instead he calls for an alternative to pluralism that would make difference and conflict the center of a history "we" all share.

If Mohanty's solution seems obvious to many of us, we are in a clear minority, as the struggle over multiculturalism unfolds in the context of a prevailing ideology of individualism. Individualism is the language of the conservatives' critique of multiculturalism, of the liberal universities' accommodation to its newly diverse populations, and of the identity politics of minority groups. In the 1960s and 1970s, proponents of affirmative action and identity politics took economic, political and social structures for granted in their analyses (one could invoke "experience," for example,

and mean something historically, culturally and discursively produced, as feminists did in consciousness-raising sessions to great political effect); but in the 1980s and 1990s, the ideological pendulum has swung back to individualism (and "experience" now signifies a prediscursive, direct and unmediated apprehension of social truth). The courts are reversing affirmative action decisions; the President vetoes civil rights legislation; and the history of discrimination as evident in statistics is being denied. All this is being done in the name of justice for individuals, who are conceived to be entirely equal units, living in a cultural and historical vacuum.

The logic of individualism has structured the approach to multiculturalism in many ways. The call for tolerance of difference is framed in terms of respect for individual characteristics and attitudes; group differences are conceived categorically and not relationally, as distinct entities rather than interconnected structures or systems created through repeated processes of the enunciation of difference. Administrators have hired psychological consulting firms to hold diversity workshops which teach that conflict resolution is a negotiation between dissatisfied individuals. Disciplinary codes that punish "hate-speech" justify prohibitions in terms of the protection of individuals from abuse by other individuals, not in terms of the protection of members of historically mistreated groups from discrimination, nor in terms of the ways language is used to construct and reproduce asymmetries of power. The language of protection, moreover, is conceptualized in terms of victimization; the way to make a claim or to justify one's protest against perceived mistreatment these days is to take on the mantle of the victim. (The so-called Men's Movement is the latest comer to this scene.) Everyone—whether an insulted minority or the perpetrator of the insult who feels he is being unjustly accused—now claims to be an equal victim before the law. Here we have not only an extreme form of individualizing, but a conception of individuals without agency.

There is nothing wrong, on the face of it, with teaching individuals about how to behave decently in relation to others, and about how to empathize with each other's pain. The problem is that difficult analyses of how history and social standing, privilege and subordination are involved in personal behavior entirely drop out. Chandra Mohanty puts it this way:

> There has been an erosion of the politics of collectivity through the reformulation of race and difference in individualistic terms. The

1960s and '70s slogan "the personal is political" has been recrafted in the 1980s as "the political is personal." In other words, all politics is collapsed into the personal, and questions of individual behaviors, attitudes, and life-styles stand in for political analysis of the social. Individual political struggles are seen as the only relevant and legitimate form of political struggle.[5]

Paradoxically, individuals then generalize their perceptions and claim to speak for a whole group, but the groups are also conceived as unitary and autonomous. This individualizing, personalizing conception has also been behind some of the recent identity politics of minorities; indeed it gave rise to the intolerant, doctrinaire behavior that was dubbed, initially by its internal critics, "political correctness."

It is particularly in the notion of "experience" that one sees this operating. In much current usage of "experience," references to structure and history are implied but not made explicit; instead, personal testimony of oppression replaces analysis, and this testimony comes to stand for the experience of the whole group. The fact of belonging to an identity group is taken as authority enough for one's speech; the direct experience of a group or culture—that is, membership in it—becomes the only test of true knowledge.

The exclusionary implications of this are twofold: all those not of the group are denied even intellectual access to it, and those within the group whose experiences or interpretations do not conform to the established terms of identity must either suppress their views or drop out. An appeal to "experience" of this kind forecloses discussion and criticism, and turns politics into a policing operation: the borders of identity are patrolled for signs of nonconformity; the test of membership in a group becomes less one's willingness to endorse certain principles and engage in specific political actions, less one's positioning in specific relationships of power, than one's ability to use the prescribed languages that are taken as signs that one is inherently "of" the group. That all of this is not recognized as a highly political process that produces identities is troubling indeed, especially because it so closely mimics the politics of the powerful, naturalizing and deeming as discernably objective facts the prerequisites for inclusion in any group.

Indeed, I would argue more generally that separatism, with its strong insistence on an exclusive relationship between group identity and access

to specialized knowledge (the argument that only women can teach women's literature or only African-Americans can teach African-American history, for example), is a simultaneous refusal and imitation of the powerful in the present ideological context. At least in universities, the relationship between identity-group membership and access to specialized knowledge has been framed as an objection to the control by the disciplines of the terms that establish what counts as (important, mainstream, useful, collective) knowledge and what does not. This has had an enormously important critical impact, exposing the exclusions that have structured claims to universal or comprehensive knowledge. When one asks not only where the women or African-Americans are in the history curriculum (for example), but why they have been left out and what are the effects of their exclusion, one exposes the process by which difference is enunciated. But one of the complicated and contradictory effects of the implementation of programs in women's studies, African-American studies, Chicano studies, and now gay and lesbian studies is to totalize the identity that is the object of study, reiterating its binary opposition as minority (or subaltern) in relation to whatever is taken as majority or dominant.

The alternative, to treat identity as the unstable, never-secured effect of a process of enunciation of cultural difference, is often dismissed as impractical for pedagogy and political mobilization. But, as Denise Riley has persuasively argued, except for the "catastrophic loss of grace in the wording," it makes far more sense for feminist politics to have Sojourner Truth ask "Ain't I a fluctuating identity?" and thereby recognize both the dangers and benefits of the collective consolidation implied in the category "women."[6] In a similar way, it makes more sense to teach our students and tell ourselves that identities are historically conferred, that this conferral is ambiguous (though it works precisely and necessarily by imposing a false clarity), that subjects are produced through multiple identifications, some of which become politically salient for a time in certain contexts, and that the project of history is not to reify identity but to understand its production as an ongoing process of differentiation, relentless in its repetition, but also—and this seems to me the important political point—subject to redefinition, resistance and change. Such an outlook might also call for a more complicated strategy than organizing political campaigns around identity groups (conceived in pluralist terms), and that, in the current context in this country at least, might be all to the good.

Notes

Other longer and somewhat different versions of this essay have appeared in *Change,* November/December 1991, and in the *Boston Review,* March 1992.

1. On difference as a process of enunciation, see Homi Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," in *Third Cinema Reader,* ed. J. Pines and P. Willemen (London: British Film Institute, 1989), pp. 111–132, especially p. 125.
2. Stuart Hall, "Miminal Selves," in *Identity: The Real Me,* (London: ICA, 1987), p. 45.
3. Anthony de Palma, "Campus Ethnic Diversity Brings Separate Worlds," *New York Times,* (May 18, 1991), p. 7.
4. S. P. Mohanty, "Us and Them: On the Philosophical Bases of Political Criticism," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 2 (Spring 1989), p. 13.
5. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education in the 1990s," *Cultural Critique* 14 (Winter 1989–90), p. 204.
6. Denise Riley, *"Am I That Name?" Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 1. An example of the literalness of the worst kind of political correctness can be found in Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991). Modleski deliberately misreads Riley's reference to Sojourner Truth as ahistorical, antiwoman, and certainly racist, thereby completely missing Riley's accomplishment for feminism, which is to *historicize,* not repudiate, the category "women."

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DEBATE

Cornel West

A Matter of Life and Death

I would first like to congratulate those who had the vision and determination to bring us together, for one can see that this is quite a relevant and pertinent issue. And I am sure that the organizers did not know that the conference would be held the same day that David Duke was up for election in the state where my mother and father were born—old Jim and Jane Crow, Louisiana. Nor did they know that it would be the day after Michael Jackson decided to make his statement about identity—Black or White—in a video. But I think this matter raises three fundamental questions that I want to zoom in on very quickly. The first is "What do we mean by *'identity'?*" Since this term itself can be a rather elusive, amorphous and even vaporous one, we need to have heuristic markings for it. The second is "What is the moral content of one's identities?"—because we all have multiple positions in terms of constructing our identities; there's no such thing as having one identity or of there being one essential identity that fundamentally defines who we actually are. And third, "What are the political consequences of our various identities?"—which is what Joan Scott was talking about with such insight.

So let us begin with a heuristic definition. For me, identity is fundamentally about desire and death. How you construct your identity is predicated on how you construct desire, and how you conceive of death: desire

for recognition; quest for visibility (Baldwin—no name in the street; nobody knows my name); the sense of being acknowledged; a deep desire for association—what Edward Said would call affiliation. It's the longing to belong, a deep, visceral need that most linguistically conscious animals who transact with an environment (that's us) participate in. And then there is a profound desire for protection, for security, for safety, for surety. And so, in talking about identity, we have to begin to look at the various ways in which human beings have constructed their desire for recognition, association and protection over time and in space, and always under circumstances not of their own choosing.

But identity also has to do with death. We cannot talk about identity without talking about death. That's what a brother named Julio Rivera had to come to terms with: the fact that his identity had been constructed in such a way that xenophobes would put him to death. Or brother Youssef Hawkins in Benson Hurst. Or brother Yankel Rosenbaum in Crown Heights. Persons who construct their identities and desires often do it in such a way that they are willing to die for it—soldiers in the Middle East, for example—or, under a national identity, that they're willing to kill others. And the rampant sexual violence in the lives of thousands of women who are attacked by men caught up in vicious patriarchal identities—this speaks to what we are talking about. But if, in fact, identity has something to do with these various kinds of desires, these various conceptions of death (we are beings-toward-death), it is because we have, given our inevitable extinction, to come up with a way of endowing ourselves with significance.

So we will weave webs of existential meaning. We will say something about the terrors of nature, the cruelties of fate, the unjustifiability of suffering. It sounds very much like religion. But let us understand: religion not in the theological sense, but in the etymological sense of *ligare*, which means to bind. Identity is about binding, and it means, on the one hand, that you can be bound—parochialist, narrow, xenophobic. But it also means that you can be held together in the face of the terrors of nature, the cruelties of fate and the need for some compensation for unjustified suffering: what theologians used to call the problem of evil. And believe me, identity cuts at that deep existential level where religion resides. That is what is frightening, especially for the Left that, like Habermas, has linked itself to an Enlightenment bandwagon. For it is a shaking of the rationalist foundation.