

## THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY AND ITS LIMITS

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*Political mobilization has been conventionally thought to happen through rational ideas, but in our time it shows an affinity with the concept of identity. What has come to be known as “politics of identity,” has proved to be enabling for the marginal and disadvantaged, who had been dishonoured by history. But, around 1990s, a few critics, disenchanted by this kind of politics, started reconsidering the “universal” as a productive theoretical category. This essay examines the limits of identity politics in this context, highlighting the importance of the category by which we make sense of our experiences today.*

**Keywords:** *Identity, Politics, Relativism, Universalism, Recognition*

The politics of identity has shown to be an enabling concept for those marginal sections of society who had been dishonoured by history. We have seen that ‘identities’ are now plural and intersectional, produced by complex negotiations among the realities of race, sexuality, class, gender and nation. Identity has also been situated in a transnational context with consideration for warping of racial, national and ethnic identities under the pressure and global exchange of culture. But, around 1990s, a few critics disenchanted by politics based on identity, started reconsidering the universal as a productive theoretical category for politics.

This essay theoretically examines the problems associated with politics of identity. It interrogates the theoretical positions which suggest that identity, being a particular category, is no longer viable to offer resistance to universal and globalized structures of oppression. In response, it claims that identity is an important category in contemporary times, because even though politics is rooted in universalist aspirations like liberty, justice and democracy; people continue to be exploited in the name of gender, race, caste,

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sexuality and ethnicities.

### **Identity in Question**

The resurgence of “new social movements” has established hegemony of politics of identity. This was followed by ground breaking work on race, class and gender as theorists of various disciplines started looking for theoretical explanations for such offshoot. Though, not ridiculing its significance, around 1990, a number of influential critics turned a skeptical eye toward identity. Looking for an alternative mode of politics, they began asking whether there is “life after identity politics” (*New Literary History* 2000).<sup>1</sup>

While asking this, they did not mean to write off the influence ‘identity’ has on politics, rather they intended to explore viability of a “new configuration of politics” in the contemporary global world. The politics of identity has been criticized on the following issues.

#### ***(1) The politics of identity is an offshoot of ‘post-materialist’ ideologies***

Critics like Inglehart are dismissive about “identity politics” as an enabling concept. He sees the emergence of this mode of politics as a new phenomenon, one which is limited to the experience of the well-off – the “post- materialists” (Inglehart, cf Calhoun 1994b, 23).

The politics of identity started with the so called liberation and life style movements in the relatively rich countries since 1960s, associated commonly with what came to be known as “new social movements.” In these societies, politics complicit with economic demands looks for affirming the ‘cultural’ rights of social groups.

But Calhoun rejects this view saying it has been part and parcel of modern politics and social life for hundreds of years (Calhoun 1994b, 23). He points out, in support, that women’s movement has roots at least 200 years old. However, he observes that universalizing and difference-denying ways of thinking about politics and social life kept off centre stage the concerns such as constitution of identity and only intermittent attention has been paid to identity politics.

## (2) *Relativism in Identity Politics*

Many advocates and analysts of social change argue that the struggle for identity (as in the case of the “new social movements”) is opposed to the demands of society. They endorse the idea that the identity claims are ‘particular’ which express the individualist feeling whereas the social demands are the aspirations of a homogenous collectivity (Isin and Wood 1999, 14). Clearly, this argument obscures the dynamic relationship between the identity claims and the social demand and the connections between the two.

Moreover, our various claims based on identity and resistance to it make sense only against the background of other identity claims and social valuations. Charles Taylor cautions us against a kind of “soft relativism” that may arise out of it, and may extend equal recognition and standing to all claims, proceeding without any judgement (cited in Calhoun 1994b, 24). In fact, granting *a priori* equal recognition to all identity claims may amount to taking none seriously (Calhoun 1994b, 24). This charge, though severe, is not without problems.

This obscures the extent to which identity claims are socially nurtured and constructed. In many instances, it reproduces tendencies of liberal individualism within implied universalism. The claims of identity are rhetorically presented, in the way that everyone is “endowed with” it, “entitled” to it, and “entitled to respect” for it (Calhoun 1994b, 24). But, it has been suggested that this liberal conception can at best provide a ground for tolerance, not for mutual respect or acceptance. And it does not even provide for understanding the phenomenon of identity formation itself.

Implicit in these rhetoric is the valuing of principle of ‘choice’ and an exaggerated sense of difference. But, this problematizes the claims for respect and recognition even more as it can in no way guarantee legitimacy.

## (3) *Identity Politics preserve “essentialized” identity*

Suspicion toward identity politics has increased as critics have become wary of claims of some version of identity politics that aims at legitimization of essentialized categorical identities. The dominant political discourse preserves and perpetuates the

essentialized racial / ethnic or identities based on sexuality. As Calhoun observes, "the impulse to find universally acceptable grounds for distinctive identities is troubled by the recurrent urge to naturalize" (Calhoun 1994b, 25). Different naturalizing arguments based on genetic research and examination of brain structure have been advanced by gay/ lesbian groups who don't see the issue of sexuality as an aspect of "choice," but rather one has no choice in the matter because one is born with it.

For instance, Rich has argued that lesbianism is not a matter of sexual preference, like race is not a concern of skin color (cf Zaretsky 1994, 208-9). Rich and others have made a point that viewing lesbianism as a "sexual preference" is merely a liberal assertion and a matter of individual rights which doesn't hold ground for radicalism. For them, lesbianism is a membership in a community based on shared experiences, i.e., on identification.

But, identity formulations such as Rich's have proven impossible to maintain, since "anti-essentialism" theorists have contended them severely (Zaretsky 1994, 209).

#### *(4) The politics of identity is exclusionary*

Wendy Brown has declared recently that politics of identity is "premised on exclusion" (cited in Farred 2000, 645). She draws attention to the tendency of highlighting the misery of the "excluded" but which gets done in isolation from groups which are differently affected. As she points out, the "injury" suffered historically by a particular community "ethnicizes politics," and prevents uniting forces with other groups for dismantling the exploitative system (cf Farred 2000, 645).

However, Grant Farred reveals the overstatement in her arguments. He argues that politics of identity has helped forge new "political alliances" (Farred 2000, 645), even if they are not permanent. The "injured" community, he says, is historically compelled to become assertive to ease the "pain," partly because its "injury" is neglected. He cites the black movements as example to demonstrate that alliances get made by the "injured" communities for their own sake (Farred 2000, 645). The "scarcity of resources" which makes it difficult to wage a lonely battle, and the presence of "ideological common ground" are reasons for such "alliances" (Farred 2000, 645).

Other critics of Brown, such as Paula M. L. Moya, has contended that cultural identities are not only and always “wounded attachments” as she suggests (Moya 2000, 8). Moya has, in contrast, shown deep faith in the politics of identity, and has argued, instead that identities can also be enabling, enlightening and enriching structures of attachment and feeling.

**(5) Identity Politics : Politics of “Recognition” or “Domination”**

Theories about identity often neglects to note that, Isin and Wood point out, identities are not only formed by groups seeking recognition but also by groups that seek domination (Isin and Wood 1999, 15). Citing Bammer and Rajchaman, they point out the growing dissatisfaction with treating identity as merely a manifestation of essential prejudices or as an effect of social prejudice which should be transcended. In what they call third wave of cultural politics, the central theme is “a desire for thinking affirmatively about identity without either *freezing* or *dissolving* difference among groups” (Isin and Wood 1999, 17; emphasis in the original). But, in the ongoing struggle for recognition waged by various identity groups, only a few succeed in affirming while transcending identities. Others, they say, succumb to essentialism and produce various forms of oppression. This argument in particular, helps us understand the growth of religious fundamentalism the world over.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas Meyer argues that fundamentalism is a political ideology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century “that recruits members based on their shared ethno-religious characteristics” (Meyer 2001, 17; emphasis in the original). Fundamentalism seeks to attack the values of modernity, which do not find favour with it. It is directed against the principle of openness, to alternative interrelations, and schemes of other ways of life. In this sense, therefore, fundamentalism establishes itself as a specific form of “*cultural counter modernism*” (Meyer 2001, 18). Its antipathy to modernity is primarily due to uncertainty it brings to individual’s identity. Despite modernity offering for both individual and society many more opportunities for self-determination, it does not guarantee success in forging a satisfactory individual and collective identity. As a product of the modern age, fundamentalism seeks to overcome uncertainty and openness by picking out from among the hallowed traditions or

uncritically accepted shibboleths one alternative as the absolute (Meyer 2001, 20-21). Consequently, they intend to instill a closed system of thinking and action.

Meyer's argument primarily dwells on the assumption that the modern culture deals with individual and collective differences. It does not seek to do away with cultural identities altogether, rather wants them to evolve. Though Meyer celebrates the values of modernity, and achievement of an independent and autonomous individual as a subject, he also emphasizes the value of the community for the individual (Elsenhans 1999, xiv). He sees the search of the identity of the individual ending in community or a larger group because one feels comfortable being in a group. He asserts that we constantly try to generate and adopt viable identities (Elsenhans 1999, xiii). But as he argues, the search for identity degenerates into "identity mania" – provided it is sure of itself – when it no longer has to encounter anything different, anything alien, ambiguous or resistant in its social environment, which could make it feel challenged unnerved, questioned in its own claim (Meyer 1999, 17). Accordingly, he views fundamentalism as, "the modern day identity mania" since in order to be sure of itself it has to undermine and subjugate and purge the social environment of all cultural differences who adopt an independent stance against it.

Nevertheless, referring to what identity might do to politics, he argues that it is not the cultural differences per se that determine whether we are enriched or alienated by them, but rather, what we wish to make of these difference. As he suggests, it's the instrumentalization of cultural differences and politicization of it for narrow ends, which produces fundamentalist groups that seek domination over the others.

### **Universal Categories vs Identity**

Through this discussion on 'identity' we now realize that the concept of identity is troublesome. Dissatisfied with the logical inconsistencies inherent in identity politics, critics have variously declared in favour of its demise. Their radical response offered to the questions of identity's after life are even more divergent.

Most of them have contended that identity is associated with the "particular," and have drawn our attention to the "universal"

as a more viable conceptual category (Albertini et al 2000, 624).

This is not to suggest that they do not see any merit in politics of identity. They agree with the theorists of identity that the universal values projected by the enlightenment are deficient, while disagreeing over the logic of particularism, advanced by the multiculturalists. In fact, for them, the particular and the universal are interdependent, and every production of a particularistic identity is made by some appeal to the universal principle (Albertini 2000, 624). This can be seen in the claims made by the politics of identity: any claim of autonomy for some identity group is based on a universal argument that all such groups should have the right of determining their future. Also, since identity claims are constructed in the broader social context, the critics point out that calls for protecting some identity group is also a call for maintaining the "status quo" (Albertini 2000, 624). This is like, as Michaels puts it, recognizing the "primacy of the subject position," which is clearly an essentialism of some sort, which the politics of identity have sought to challenge (Michaels 2000, 660-1, 653). He accordingly argues for ideology, not identity, suggesting to move from "commitment to difference" to the "politics of disagreement." According to him, disagreement involves challenging "the idea that something that is true must be true for everyone" and therefore, in ideological conflicts which are universal, it is important to invoke the universal "to explain the fact that we disagree" (Michaels 2000, 653).

Eric Lott seems to be wary of the fact that the identity based movements "can risk essentializing political urges in marginalized bodies rather than extensively disrupting the normative regimes that produced them in the first place" (Lott 2000, 667). He certainly considers them as heavy burdens and so observes that the "resulting insufficiency" of these struggles "is lately giving rise to the ideas (and language) of universalism" (Lott 2000, 679).

It is clear that both have suggested adopting universalist categories again, for its theoretical viability, and for making corrections to the "insufficiency" of politics of identity.

### **Prospects for Future**

The limitations of the politics of identity necessarily requires assessing their adequacy for politics in future. Much of the criticisms of identity politics which are concerned of the fact that it may lead

to same regressive political identification such as fundamentalism is based on selective presumptions. Even as Meyer argues that, it is “a modern day identity mania where identity projects itself as one and the same in every realms of action,” he does not point out how this identity is formed (Meyer 2001, 17). He considers it as a homogeneous and consensual process which seeks adherence to its ethic by all the members of the community. But, he does not realize that identities are not chosen freely, rather often forced upon people, which get manipulated by vested interests (Albertini 2000, 62).

Thinking about identity formation for domination obscures aspirational identity based politics, for groups not included in the realm of the “political.” The politics of identity has challenged the understanding that individual identity formed on the objective criterion like rationality is the only potent force for the politics of social change. It has demanded recognition for and sought the affirmation of excluded identities – such as race, gender and sexuality – as publicly good and politically salient. It has thus led to broadening of the idea of the “political.” As such, its only become much significant to undertake the task of reclaiming identity, as Paula L. Moya suggests, because “identities are evaluable theoretical claims that have epistemic consequences” (Moya 2000, 8). This is because our experiences and understanding of the world is consequently dependent on who we understand ourselves to be.

### **Conclusion**

This essay has examined the problems with the politics of identity. It has discussed the case for universal category in place of identity as a new configuration of politics. But, my suggestion has been that “identity”, as a category should not be discarded, since it brings to the fore the contextual experiences of the community. This is because, though the goals of politics are rooted in the universalist aspirations such as liberty, justice and democracy, people continue to be exploited in the name of gender, race, caste, sexuality and ethnicity.

### **Notes**

- 1 A two-day symposium was organised in the spring of 1999 at the University of Virginia, to explore a possibility of a “new configuration of politics.” The lively



debates sparked by conference persuaded the editorial collective of *New Literary History* to bring out a special issue for discussion. See *New Literary History* (2000).

- 2 The term is often used pejoratively to imply inflexibility, dogmatism, and authoritarianism. It means taking some beliefs as unchallengeable, fundamental truths. It operates through supporters whose earnestness comes from the doctrinal certainty of these beliefs.

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