

## IDENTITY AND POLITICS: THE RECENT DEBATES

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*The concept of identity has seen a resurgence in theoretical debates because much political mobilization in recent times has happened in its name. The concept helps account for differences based on locality and particular characteristics, which an individual shows by virtue of his position in a community – and this is an antithesis to the modernist epistemology, which regards the individual as an abstract, rational self. This essay examines the relationship between identity and politics theoretically.*

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### Introduction

The concern for 'identity' is quite old but the concept holds a great significance today. Theoretically, the concept helps account for differences based on locality and particular characteristics which an individual shows by virtue of his position in a community – and this is an antithesis to the modernist epistemology, which regards the individual as an abstract, rational self. This essay examines this relationship theoretically.

The modern individual, as theorists have invariably argued, is an abstraction, just an agency or self who is immune to passion and emotion, the traits which characterized the pre-modern society, but who is connected with others through reason. Rationality defined the modern individual's relation with others as well as his location, behaviour or conduct in society. Individual as actors were to make autonomous decisions in relation to the market, which itself was considered to be a self-regulating system and functioned on the logic that since all the individuals were rational, they were necessarily 'equivalent'. This ideology essentially made some tacit assumptions about the identities of these individuals and presented itself to be certain and universal thereby rendering their differences epiphenomenal. It justified itself through 'innumerable forms of the argument between nature and nurture, overall committing itself to the claim that identities are constructed' and therefore, individuals should shun differences, such as those marked by class and gender (Calhoun 1994a, 3).

But privileging the individual in this manner obscured the differences between them. The recent theoretical insights from post structuralism and postmodernism point this out and remind us that there have always been differences among people, that individualism repressed these differences, and that power shaped identity. In

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this essay, I will discuss the relationship between identity and politics, using recent theoretical discussions on the theme.

### **Explaining the resurgence**

Identity has surfaced again in theoretical writings because it has become recently a 'crucial focus of political struggle' replacing the notion of politics based on ideas. This new phenomenon has re-emphasized the importance of 'culture' in politics. Post-war movements like, civil rights movement in the US, anti-colonial nationalist movements, movement for the environment and those by women, gay / lesbians, workers brought this idea to prominence.

These movements not only sought various instrumental goals, but also sought 'to revalue the devalued pole of a dichotomized hierarchy such as white/black, male/female or heterosexual/gay' which would affirm the previously excluded identities as publicly good and politically salient (Zaretsky 1994, 199). This sort of politics challenged the orthodoxy and destabilized identity by eschewing 'such terms as groups, rights, value and society in favour of such terms as places, spaces, alterity and subject positions', and aimed 'to decenter or subvert, rather than to conquer or assert' (Zaretsky 1994, 200).

In this paper, I discuss how 'identity' has been problematized in recent times. Can an individual be said to have a 'fixed' identity which is his 'essence' irrespective of his location in a culture? If so, how should we define the identity migrant workers who keep changing their location? Can an individual be considered to be disembodied, if modernity has attempted a sharp break with traditional identity schemes such as kinship, caste, etc? How and why has 'identity politics' gained such importance recently? We are confronted daily with events which are interpreted, at least in part, as matters of identity. How then does the individuals understanding or perception of her/himself explain his/her being part of the social relations in which he/she engages?

### **Discourse of 'Identity'**

Since the 1980s, the issue of identity has assumed importance with regard to gender and race within the context of academic debates. Most of the early theoretical writings which studied change and development brought about by industrialization emphasized on a pattern of social change which subordinated all social statuses to the market and production relations and 'presumed that statuses such as gender, ethnicity, race, and sexuality were subordinate to those produced by economic rationalism' (Allen 1998, 48).<sup>1</sup>

This suggests that the process of industrialization marginalised these social attributes as belonging to 'traditional' societies even though they existed. Subsequently they became less and less relevant in understanding societal relations.

Though the theorists didn't totally neglect these social attributes, they were

recognized as relevant only as exogenous factors and situationally specific which would not affect the relations in the market. The individual was conceived of as a rational being inside the market which was marked by a dynamic social and sexual division of labour. Such views may be traced back to the Enlightenment vision, which argued that in understanding society we can separate, in theory, a grid of abstractly equal individuals from their concrete determinations such as (over time) race, nationality, gender or religion (Zaretsky 1994, 200). Seen as such, not only does the individual become a disembodied cognitive subject, knowledge and even knowledge constructions are presented as dependent on this subject (Calhoun 1994b, 10).<sup>2</sup>

But the recent issues of identity have stressed the incompleteness, fragmentation, and contradictions of individual existence. The notion that individuals can be singular, integral, altogether harmonious, and unproblematic identities, has been challenged. It has been, consequently, realized that diversity and variety cannot be overlooked, and uniformity can't be imposed on a group.

In the modernist western philosophy, when knowledge comprehends the other, the alterity of the latter disappears as it is integrated into the same. We must understand that this philosophy privileges only the 'subject' which is understood in terms of its temporality, whereas the state of continuous change is denied to the object. The object, thus, is always a static entity. Why is the 'other' excluded when the 'subject', depends and derives its nature and identity by depending on the other?

It has now been emphasized that identity is socially constructed and embedded in specific social relations and therefore, identity is not simply an individual matter, but a social product located in time and space. It thus, is not a fixed static entity, but has to be seen as a dynamic process (Allen 1998, 51). The problem with individualism was that it made the individual a sovereign entity which was ahistorical. It formed a concept of man which had an unchanging nature and essence which made them behave in a certain way at all the communication levels. It denied agency to other different identities and developed a discursive history writing which was marked for its propensity to strive for the primary identities of origin, unified development and cause and effect. This particular view projected a dichotomy between the traditional and the modern and the East and the West, thereby using this knowledge for colonizing the East, the knowledge of whose culture was used solely for the purpose to define the identity of the West.<sup>3</sup>

### **Identity and 'Difference'**

The contemporary world has been marked by heterogeneity. It has been re-emphasized through the various social movements which emerged after the world war. The post war consensus that there can be one single model of understanding and developing/restructuring society came under a serious scrutiny.

This was more so, because it came to be realized that to design justice for people/ or to know what they want, one first has to understand the society for which one is

designing justice.<sup>4</sup> Identity politics asserting pluralism resurfaced and shocked many theorists who thought universal rationalism presupposed by modern philosophy would be able to surpass all the social divisions (mainly the divisions based on primitive notions).

Differences and heterogeneity in society were reasserted, but it was argued, they were occluded hitherto because of a characteristic process of knowledge construction which appropriated the essence of the other into itself. It simply provided a misrepresentation of the heterogeneous condition since an identity neglected or sublated some other alterities (or identities) in order to define itself. Thus, there was always a construction of the 'other' for defining someone's 'identity'. This implies that differences are suppressed while conceiving an identity (both individual and group).<sup>5</sup> Seen as such, Sheila Allen (1998, 58) observes that identity is marked by similarity (with those like itself) and difference (from those unlike itself), and it makes sense only in relation to what it is not (the other). It means that differences within social categories are ignored, while those between one category and others are emphasized.

This doesn't, however, describe social reality. In practice, individuals derive their identity from their parents and family members, and from those they interact with, wherein 'particular combination of relationships and experiences is unique to each individual' and hence 'the simple dichotomy of sameness and difference' can't be applied to understand this (Allen 1998, 58). Therefore, even differences can never be permanent/static or fixed as it would overlook the fundamental dynamism that underscore all socio-political constructions of which identity is one.

So, a dichotomous approach whereby only sameness or difference is emphasized is not appropriate for understanding the complexity of social divisions. We will have to step beyond the discursive view of the concept of identity which maintains that it is created by ignoring the world outside identity. Only when such view is discarded that we can understand the social or rational identity of a marginalised group. What is needed now is the 'exposition of multiple identities, latent or otherwise, and a theorizing of the social relationships in which they are embedded' so as to develop, a fruitful dialogue among the multiple non-threatening identities (Allen 1998, 58).<sup>6</sup>

### **Social Exclusion and Identity**

If we understand social differences, we would also be able to see that adopting a dichotomous approach is problematic, since the mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization are inbuilt into it.

Marginality has become the central focus of the debate in the academic theory, leading to the study of different social identities (which were once ignored). A uni-dimensional view of identity marginalizes the 'other' identities because it is based on negation and assimilation of others.

Such a conception of identity conveniently excludes those categories which do

not fit 'a norm which confers sameness', not to mention individuals of a 'mixed' parentage (Allen 1998, 60). Differences, for instance, of class, race, gender are subsumed under a single homogenizing, dichotomized category. In a society where race is the ordering principle, there are more issues than racial oppression which demand equal attention, and no dichotomous understanding of racism will be helpful. Only a rethinking in non-exclusive ways, would inform us about the other experienced vulnerabilities, such as those of women and workers, which are a result of patriarchy and class-division in society.

### **Multiplicity, Identity, and Loyalty**

Most of what is characterized as 'identity politics' involve group of individuals who supposedly share an identity marker (Calhoun 1994a, 26). This view of politics abstracts the contexts of social interactions through which identities are negotiated, by which individuals identify with one identity marker over the others.

Identity groups are not coherent, they are characterized by divisions internally, looking to be appropriated into a larger category if it suits.

Every collective identity is open to both internal subdivision and also at the same time calls for its incorporation into some larger category of primary identity. Internal dialogue is ignored in favour of external dynamism. There are tensions central to conceptualizing an identity, which only proves that identity is not a finished accomplishment. Mainstream theories try to get around this by appealing to some 'objective' criterion, such as rational self-interest, but which also is not sufficient.

Seeing identities with respect to 'objective' social positions means that we see them retrospectively, ignoring the dynamism of social identity. We should not forget that identities can be empowering for our life projects, personal or political, and that identities are formed to realize the moral aspirations we might have, but which we may never fully realize.

### *Notes*

- 1 In both liberal and Marxist writings, neither capitalists nor labourers were depicted as having any gender, ethnicity, race, religion or nationality.
- 2 The Cartesian cogito sums up this idea in the famous principle 'I think therefore I am'. It creates a hierarchical dichotomy between mind and matter which was further used to create a series of binary oppositions, aptly justified by the argument that it was a 'rational exercise'. Poststructuralism and Postmodernism critique this view.
- 3 This has been highlighted by the Postcolonial Studies, which sees colonialism as a cultural project which transformed the traditional cultures using strategies of conquest and coercion. Knowledge of the culture of the East is used to define the West's self, as the 'culture' becomes the main site of operation of colonial power.
- 4 In the 1980s and 1990s, a school of thought known as 'Communitarianism' emerged against 'individualism'. It claims that individualism neglects the role of community in shaping individual freedom and well-being, ignoring that individuals need the society.

- The self is 'embedded' in social and community practices, by which individual's autonomy is formed. In short, cultural contexts should not be ignored. See Kymlicka (1993).
- 5 But it has been asserted that questions of gender, race and sexuality have only meant that classes (or collective/group identities) can no longer be seen as coherent groups united by a general consciousness or worldview, for differences cut across these already differentiated groups in a number of ways. See Colebrook (1997, 175).
  - 6 She provides the case of women and women experiences which were marginalised as 'other' within patriarchy, making the men determining and dominating. But this understanding is caused by the dichotomous approach which ignores complex social divisions, including those among women themselves.

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