

DANGEROUS FOUNDATIONS

AN ARGUMENT AGAINST THE
'IDENTITY' IN IDENTITY POLITICS



THIS IS AN ARGUMENT AGAINST IDENTITY POLITICS, BUT IT IS NOT AN ARGUMENT AGAINST FEMINISM, OR QUEER LIBERATION, OR ANTI-RACISM WORK. IT IS INSTEAD AN ARGUMENT THAT THE OPPRESSIONS USUALLY COMBATED THROUGH IDENTITY POLITICS—A STRATEGY BASED ON THE AFFIRMATION OF IDENTITY—COULD BE BETTER FOUGHT THROUGH ITS ABANDONMENT, OR IN THE LEAST THROUGH A RADICAL DESTABILISATION OF EXISTING IDENTITIES.

I believe that Identity—always mythical and invented—is in itself oppressive, and that a politics founded upon one or another particular Identity is a dangerous strategy. These dangers are numerous, and include: the creation and policing of arbitrary boundaries of Identity, rigorous essentialism, the intensification of the norms associated with the Identity, the suppression and homogenisation of difference within, and the failure to recognise commonalities across boundaries of Identity.

In line with Judith Butler and Donna Haraway, I want to suggest that a politics of affinity, rather than Identity, has vastly more potential to transform the myriad of oppressive relations that we are subject to, and participate in, every day. And though this essay is primarily argued through the lens of the sex/gender/desire matrix, the implications for other struggles based around Identity are thoroughly implied.

The 'Identity' of identity politics requires some investigation. It isn't the more mundane aspects of our identity such as our name, our age, or perhaps the car we drive, though all of these could become the basis for capital-'I' Identity. Rather, the idea of Identity used here includes sex/gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, nationalism, sometimes class (when it defines who one 'is') or even political allegiances ('anarchist' included). Identity in this sense is an extrapolation from some personal aspect of our selves — parts of our body, our desires, beliefs, etc. — to a social category. In turn, being a member of such a social category is deemed to say something important about us. One boy being attracted to another boy, for example, is one desire among the thousands of everyday desires we have. But in contemporary society, this desire becomes something much bigger: it locates the boy in a social category, that of the 'homosexual' (and, thus, not a heterosexual), which then implies a number of things about the boy, a number of essential qualities. Perhaps he is a sissy, or artistic, likes shopping, or any other number of homosexual stereotypes.

It says something else too: in being homosexual, the boy becomes located within a social hierarchy. He is lesser than heterosexuals, perhaps on par with bisexuals (or perhaps, as half-bloods, they are lower still?), and no doubt above transsexuals. Identity is essential to these sorts of hierarchies. Racism, sexism, compulsory heterosexuality, and so on, require that an otherwise unique individual become Identified, given an appropriate placing within the various hierarchies of Identity, and treated in accordance with the value, traits and norms associated with that Identity. Those Identities deemed of highest value are usually considered normal, and deviations beyond its boundaries are considered lesser and subservient, or sometimes even abhorrent (and in need of rectification).

Despite this hierarchy, the different identities actually need each other to make sense: the heterosexual only makes sense in relation to the homosexual, defined as its opposite, its relational 'other,' and likewise man and woman only remain stable categories of identity when they have each other to be defined against: I am a woman because I have a vagina which a man does not have.

In being the basis for founding much of our behavior, and our conceptions of the world and each other, these identity categories need certain solidity, a foundation from which they can be asserted. And, obviously, simply being relational to one another doesn't provide this foundation. Identities are therefore deemed as natural, as biological or god-given. In having a penis one joins the identity group of 'men,' being like them in several very important ways, and exercising the power attributed to them; and that this is natural therefore puts it beyond question. The fact that these identities constantly

change in meaning or are simply invented, that the homosexual identity, for example, was only invented in the last decade of the nineteenth century, must therefore be forgotten or else history rewritten.

Identity works in two ways. It firstly locates someone within a social category, and thus within a particular hierarchy: it shapes how people relate to one another. In this operation, social identities are applied to ourselves from an external source, and we are judged and treated accordingly. What is more insidious, however, is when identity categories become internalized. They become standards to which we aspire, and we seek to take on and enact these categories based on what we consider to be their essential qualities. And so in being located as a man one becomes attributed the power granted to the social category of men (in those situations where this power is recognized, that is), but one also becomes subject to the norms of masculinity. To be a man, one must constantly act as a man, must properly perform their masculinity, and re-establish their identity in new situations. Identity, therefore, is a prescription; it defines how people should act. And it is a cause of much pain when people who are identified as a particular identity fail to perform that identity properly: they must constantly monitor their movements, their speech, their interests, and so on, or else face retribution from those around them. In properly performing their identity, however, they simultaneously recreate the norms associated with that identity, subtly but effectively policing the boundaries of the category. And of course, people can, and often do, police the boundaries of identity much more explicitly in employing a continuum of violence, from non-verbal and symbolic gestures of disapproval, verbal taunting, social isolation, physical violence and even death.

It's a peculiar thing that most all of the movements seeking to overcome identity-based hierarchies have sought not to dismantle the founding identity, but have instead asserted it ever more strongly, demanding equality of identities. This is identity politics, and it has been the dominant method of approaching these struggles for well over 200 years.

The Identity part of identity politics has such appeal partly as a result of the 'existential solidity' Identity provides. Or, put differently, it gives us a concrete foundation for our place in the world, our position within the natural order of things. It helps put to rest any number of niggling questions about 'who we really are.'

The dominance of identity politics itself is no doubt in part because there is a very real sense of solidarity to be found amongst people subject to a similar experience. In coming together, and in realizing that individual experiences

are shared across a number of people, there is a great sense of strength to be gained. One of the first moves I made in coming to terms with my obviously deviant sexual desires was to seek out and talk to other guys my age, who had come out or were coming out, to share stories and learn survival strategies from one another, and to simply provide support. Building a political strategy upon these linkages isn't such a leap.

There is possibly a second reason for its dominance as a strategy, in that it is particularly well suited to liberal politicking. The liberal paradigm of equal rights before the State requires, firstly, recognition before the State. This cannot be achieved without a well-defined 'special interest' or lobby group, whose boundaries are clearly delineated, and with leaders or organizations that can speak on behalf of the group, that can represent it before the State. Within this liberal logic of recognition and representation, Identity therefore becomes the bedrock upon which it is based, and it is not politically sensible to question this foundation.

In any case, identity politics has dominated, based upon the familiar strategy of oppressed identity groups asserting their Identity, demonstrating the common condition of oppression and the unity across that Identity, and demanding equality alongside other Identities.

So what is wrong with identity politics? How could it possibly be dangerous? I want to use Judith Butler's 'matrix' of sex/gender/desire to make my points here. In this matrix, sex and gender are separated in the classic (but problematic) division between the biological body (sex) and the social/cultural body (gender). The French feminist Simone de Beauvoir's famous line from *The Second Sex* makes this separation quite succinct: 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.' Gender in this sense is the identity given to the biological body, including the prescriptions and norms given to specific bodies, the knowledge about those bodies, and so on. Desire is the last aspect of this matrix and describes sexual desire, whether for men or women, young or old, or any other number of sexual desires. The only two truly accepted sex/gender/desire matrices are male/man/hetero and female/woman/hetero. Jumbled matrices are obviously of a lesser status, and matrices, which cannot be clearly described, such as hermaphrodite/neither masculine nor feminine/asexual, are abhorrent, or 'object.' Drawing upon this framework, I want to try and illustrate some of the dangers of identity politics.

Identity politics reinforces (binary) divisions and is essentialist. In choosing not to transcend, but rather found their politics upon the boundaries of existing identity formations, identity politics tends to reinforce these

divisions. Defining and redefining the nature of the identity upon which these strategies are founded results in a policing of the borders of that identity, and this often takes the form of controversies about where precisely the boundaries lie (are transgendered men to be considered alongside women? are bisexuals our allies or sexual traitors? etc.).

The unproblematic use of the identity categories of men/women and heterosexual/homosexual gives these categories a new life; it treats the categories as natural or biological, thus hiding their 'invented' nature. In doing so, the use of these categories engages in an often-rigorous essentialism, entertaining the idea that there are indeed universal and historical properties associated with sex, gender and sexuality, for example. This is particularly strange given the widespread feminist concern with detaching gender from sex. Judith Butler has commented that this separation should have radically destabilized the binary categories of gender, creating a proliferation of gender scripts (since male \neq man, and female \neq woman), but instead gender is talked about in the very same terms as sex, where gender and sex become one and the same again (and never mind that biological sex is itself not dualistic).¹ The same applies to the use of homosexual and heterosexual categories. Rather than seeking to reveal the multiplicity of desires within each of us that certainly transcend these categories, 'gay pride,' for example, has revealed in its distinct and separate identity to heterosexual culture.

Identity politics further entrenches individuals under the respective regime of identity. In calling upon individuals to embrace a particular identity, the individual either enters for the first time the regime of norms associated with that identity, or else has the norms brought upon them with renewed strength. Engaging in homosexual relations, for example, did not necessarily make one a homosexual prior to the gay rights movement (and still does not, of course). In the rise of homosexual identity politics, however, large numbers of people were called upon to 'come out' and be proud of being gay, to embrace the homosexual identity. Those who came to identify as gay found themselves brought under the norms of gay identity; they became subject to the homosexual discursive regime, and the stronger the insistence upon this identity, the stronger its norms came to bear.

When people don't fit with these norms — for example, are hopeless at artistic endeavors, aren't beautiful and slim, are macho, or are not hopelessly intrigued by shopping — the gay identity becomes either strongly alienating or, more commonly, works so as to transform them according to those very expectations. My personal experience of first identifying as gay and watching TV shows like *Will and Grace* was one of alienation (and disgust), followed by an attempt to bring myself into line with those expectations.

The assertion of identity within the gay rights movement also had the effect of creating an entirely new commercial market, where a large group of otherwise disparate people could now be collectively called upon through advertising to buy or partake in a variety of gay-oriented commodities and services. This was a similar operation to that of homosexual norms.

Identity politics homogenizes and overrides difference within. In asserting a commonality across an identity, those that fall outside these descriptions have their voices silenced and actual differences are suppressed. This is especially true of identity politics when it engages in representation, where individuals or organizations presume that their experiences are generalized speak on behalf of all members of that particular identity. The dominant versions of second-wave feminism, for example, were regularly opposed from the 1960s up until the 1990s first by working class women whose experiences were altogether different to the then-dominant middle class feminists, then by black women, lesbian women, transsexual women, and a number of other intersections of identities and experiences. Another way of saying this is that identity politics often imposes a unity upon what are clearly divergent experiences.²

The dominant articulation of a particular identity not only silences those who fall outside its parameters, but also works to create new norms of identity. It was not just in watching *Will and Grace* that I came under the norms of homosexual identity, but also in the dominant voices of homosexual organizations, in the voices of 'my own people.' The media that they produced, the 'help guides,' and the stories that they told, had a much bigger effect than heterosexual media on creating the standards to which I believed I had to aspire. This was a form of internal control and regulation, though it was internal only with respect to the arbitrary boundaries of homosexual identity.

Identity politics reduces 'internal' power plays to secondary concern. This is very closely related to the last issue, because of course those doing the silencing were precisely those who were higher in other hierarchies, whether straight, white or upper/middle-class, for example. There is a very real and justifiable fear that these internal differences and hierarchies will shatter the supposed commonality of experience given to an identity. Therefore, equality is often sought first and foremost for the primary identity, and intra-identity hierarchies are suppressed for the sake of unity, to be dealt with as a secondary concern (such as at the annual conference). It thus encourages a piecemeal approach, ignoring that concrete relations of oppression and domination are experienced within a single field of experience.

Identity politics masks commonalities that transcend the boundaries of identity. Identity politics often frames oppression as singularly and uniquely

experienced by one particular identity to which others, at most, can act as allies. This masks the shared interests some within an identity category may share with others designated beyond its boundaries. Gay rights, for example, frames homosexual oppression as something only experienced by homosexuals. But what of the sissy boy who fails to live up to the norms of masculinity, who may in fact be largely heterosexual in desire but nonetheless gets pounded into school walls and jeered as a faggot? The same sex/gender/desire regime is clearly at play, but the closed boundaries of homosexual/heterosexual identity mask and obscure this commonality.

Identity politics often encourages limited models of power. It frames power as 'them' versus 'us,' as one identity group dominating another. Heterosexuals oppress homosexuals, men oppress women, sex-dominants oppress intersex/non-sex people. As a general description this is often true, but by itself it misses at least two further aspects. It misses how power is also created bottom-up, which is to say there are generalized practices that occur across identities that re-create norms and further entrench identity formations. Where, for example, do the norms of masculinity and femininity come from? Who polices their boundaries? Who exercises violence when norms are broken? The production of these norms and their maintenance cannot be reduced to one group, not even in a general way.

The second aspect often overlooked in identity politics is when the general oppressor/oppressed relation becomes conceived as a hard-and-fast rule, a totalizing form of power where all relationships are re-coded in this way. When, at the concrete and everyday level, these relations are reversed or otherwise broken, identity politics often tends to treat them as anomalies, and thus sidelines the experience completely.

These problems around founding a political strategy upon identity have been well known within feminist and queer theory for some time. The fear was that, without asserting a central point of commonality and unity in Identity, there was no other way to continue the feminist/queer project. And so the notion of 'strategic essentialism' was developed, which posed a project based around 'womanhood,' for example, which was conscious of its mythical founding principle, but which used it nonetheless as a necessary point of unity. While strategic in its intention, the project rapidly digressed towards explicit essentialism only to be renounced by one of its original theorists, Gayatri Spivak.

Can we imagine a politics against Identity-based oppression that is not itself founded upon Identity? But if not Identity, around what do we come together?

One answer to this has been what has been called a ‘politics of affinity.’ A ‘politics of affinity’ is politics that seeks cooperation between people based upon similarities in political project, in vision, and in methods. It is a series of associations formed not upon who we are today, but based on how we desire to change and what we desire to effect, whether that be a dismantling of gender scripts, the creation of practices that encourage egalitarian relations, and so on. This is therefore not a project founded upon existing categories of Identity, but instead ‘marks out a self-consciously constructed space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship’ (Donna Haraway, 1991: 156).

A politics of affinity seeks to abandon Identity as its founding principle, and seeks in its methods not to maintain and re-inscribe the boundaries of Identity. It does not, however, pretend Identity doesn’t exist. Indeed, Identity is so thoroughly pervasive that it is difficult to imagine a politics without it. A politics of affinity therefore embodies at least two moments. The first moment is a recognition and interrogation of existing categories of Identity, their boundaries, their essential properties, their myths of legitimacy, and the mechanisms through which they are deployed so as to create oppressive relations. In doing this, it also seeks to destabilize them: it is necessary to show the boundaries as arbitrary and overflowing, the myths of legitimacy as false, and to describe the changing history of how those Identities have been understood or created.

This second moment involves a process of ‘disidentification,’ which is both a rejection of existing categories of Identity as a lived practice, and necessarily the creation of new performances, new scripts, perhaps even new Identities (to be abandoned and undermined the moment they take hold). Identities maintain their grasp only partially through ideas; the more substantial component to Identity maintenance is in the practices and performances of our everyday lives. The rejection of Identity therefore means the rejection and concomitant creation of new ways of living. It means behaving differently, trampling scripts of Identity (and not simply inverting them either) and creating ourselves anew with one another through collective experiments. These experiments in living must seek to confront existing practices of domination, but they also allow for a positive conception of freedom not possible within identity politics: the creation of practices that further extend the possibilities of living for everyone.

In doing so, in seeking to spread a project of disidentification, the hope is that the foundations for Identity-based oppressions will be undermined, and new egalitarian practices developed in their stead. Judith Butler has

ironically suggested that more might be achieved by searching for points of disidentification than identification, and that in this process a politics of affinity, and not identity, may be forged.

* A POLITICS OF AFFINITY... IS ABOUT ABANDONING THE FANTASY THAT FIXED, STABLE IDENTITIES ARE POSSIBLE AND DESIRABLE, THAT ONE IDENTITY IS BETTER THAN ANOTHER, THAT SUPERIOR IDENTITIES DESERVE MORE OF THE GOOD AND LESS OF THE BAD THAT A SOCIAL ORDER HAS TO OFFER, AND THAT THE STATE FORM SHOULD ACT AS THE ARBITER OF WHO GETS WHAT (RICHARD DAY, 2005: 188)

ENDNOTES

1. 'If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders' (Judith Butler, 2006: 9).

2. 'These domains of exclusion reveal the coercive and regulatory consequences of that construction, even when that construction has been elaborated for emancipatory purposes. Indeed, the fragmentation within feminism and the paradoxical opposition to feminism of 'women' whom feminism claims to represent suggest the necessary limits of identity politics' (Judith Butler, 2006: 6).

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