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## The Latent Universal Within Identity Politics

Time and again, theorists mistake ideas relevant to specific contexts for universal truths, and recent social movement research is no exception. While movements are increasingly international and even synchronically connected across national borders, analysis of them largely remains within the nationalistic framework of government funding agencies and language-communities. In France, where political action is so state oriented, Alain Touraine insists that social movements be analyzed by their impact on the state.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, where fragmented activism possessing immense resources abounds, analysis of social

<sup>1</sup> He continually defines social movements in terms of power. For his own discussion of this and other issues, see Alain Touraine, "Commentary on Dieter Rucht's Critique," in Rucht (editor) *Research on Social Movements* (Campus Verlag, 1991) pp. 385-391.

Touraine poses a "new central conflict" like the labor movement in the nineteenth century. From detailed studies of the Polish workers' movement, the anti-nuclear movement, student movements, and regional movements in southern France, he arrives at the conclusion that: "we were able to observe...both the growing autonomy of social movements, freeing themselves from the control of political parties and ideologies, and the central role of cultural problems in societies where 'cultural industries' play a rapidly growing role, especially in health, education and mass communication." (p. 388). For him, unlike industrial societies in which workers opposing capitalists was the central conflict, "programmed societies" are sites where social movements centering on knowledge and identity are crucial.

Seeking to construct a critical scientific sociology, Touraine engaged social movement participants in hundreds of hours of discussions after which his researchers wrote up and presented their views of the "highest" possible meaning of the movement's actions in order to provoke discussion of larger transformative ideas within focused movements. He seeks to infuse social movements with knowledge. But as each of his books make clear, he is informed by social movements -not necessarily the other way around. Touraine's interventionist sociology is the residue of Leninism in academic theory: The educated outsider bringing knowledge to the committed is nothing but a reformulation of Lenin's notion of the party. In another sense as well, Touraine's conception of social movements is traditional Leninism. For him, diversity and fragmentation go hand in hand and permit the ruling elites to employ tactics of divide and conquer, and universality cannot be present within a diverse array; each stage of social development should have one unifying oppositional social movement. See Ron Eyerman, "Social Movements and Social Theory," *Sociology* Vol. 18, No. 1 (1984) pp. 71-82.

movements has been based on the resource mobilization paradigm.<sup>2</sup> In Germany, where the government's response to social movements was to label them as "terrorists," Habermas puts forth the view that societies could resolve their crises if their members addressed each other with respect in an ideal free speech situation.<sup>3</sup> Habermas's analysis is unmistakably German insofar as he seeks to enhance democratic discourse in a society that for most of the twentieth century has marginalized (if not murdered) its radical critics.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> By focusing on issues like the availability of resources for movements and the impact of state intervention against and within movements, such analysis moves the study of movements in the direction of natural science. Instrumental factors are assumed to be central, and "actors" are assumed to make utilitarian choices related to participation. In this sense, social movements are considered to be essentially no different than any other form of institutional behavior. Posing atomized individuals as the building block of movements (and society), the issue then becomes whether identities are rationally constructed by abstract individuals or by groups with specific identities in history.

Despite its great differences from Touraine, resource mobilization theory also privileges traditionally structured political initiatives over ones which do not seek inclusion in the existing system. (See Margit Mayer, "Social Movement Research in the United States: A European Perspective," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* Vol. 4, No. 1 (1991) p. 464.) According to the resource mobilization perspective: "Victories generally begin with policy successes and culminate in distributional goals." (See Craig Jenkins, *The Politics of Insurgency: The Farm Workers Movement in the 1960s* (Columbia University Press, 1985) p. 21.) Their middle-range perspective prohibits their comprehension of the fundamental differences of "post-political" movements, and they end up (like the more astute Habermas) in advocating traditional forms of political engagement.

<sup>3</sup> Habermas fails to see that the entire world cannot live at the standard of living of the integrated middle class, and that the structural imperatives of the system demand intensified poverty alongside wealth. Can societies democratically decide to limit the system's predatory character vis-a-vis private life and the natural environment? Even from within his own set of assumptions, Habermas's search for communicative competence in the rational structures of language and consciousness ignores entirely the intuitive ties between humans, our passions and unconscious impulses. In the work of Marcuse, art and nature constitute dimensions of freedom (that remain unthematized by Habermas).

<sup>4</sup> The German idea of justice is predicated upon the *Rechtsstaat*, a government that respects laws and inspires and fulfills moral obligations. In the U.S., our liberal tradition emphasizes individual liberty with as little government as possible. As Fredric Jameson commented in his book on postmodernism: "...the culture of the *Spießbürger* and the philistine suggests the possibility that in this particular national situation Habermas may well be right, and the older forms of high modernism may still retain something of the subversive power they have lost elsewhere." *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991, p. 59).

While it is extremely problematic to treat social movements as simply conditioned by the form and circulation of capital and the structures of social relations, my analysis regards movements as partially conditioned by impersonal economic forces and political dynamics. Postmodernists generally sever analysis of social movements from such categories, regarding notions of structure as vestigial modernist relics. For postmodernists, "society" is a construct; we live in multiple and decentered contexts. Using the language of post-modernists, simulacra (mediated semblances of life) are more important than history in determining our actions. Once understood from this perspective, social movements are no longer vehicles for the transformation of the social order as a whole (since that is simply a phantom) but are "new social movements"<sup>5</sup> oriented around specific contested sites and questions of identity (like race, gender and age).

<sup>5</sup> A broad range of analysts besides postmodernists has come to employ the term "new social movements" to refer to various types of post-Fordist social movements: feminist, youth, ecology, peace and gay (and in the U.S., Black, Latino, Asian-American and Native American). As identity became key to the self-understanding of participants in new social movements, ascriptive criteria for membership defined the various emergent formations. The term "new social movements" is actually a misnomer since oppositional forces structured along the lines of identity are not new: Women mobilized no later than 1848 and African-Americans since the arrival of the first African slaves in America.

The best single definition of new social movements I have found is contained in Andrei Markovits and Philip Gorski, *The German Left: Red, Green and Beyond* (Oxford University Press, 1993) pp. 10-13. In the first place, they demarcate the difference between old movements, "which concentrated on the expansion of rights" with new ones which "devote their energy to the expansion of 'autonomy.'" In addition they delineate 8 other characteristics of new social movements, such as: eschewing comprehensive theories, valuing the collective good and identity rather than individual interests and class politics, and independence from political parties. German sociologists Karl-Werner Brand and Roland Roth both characterize new social movements as intermediate levels of communication between isolated citizens and political parties.

An early analysis of new social movements was published as a special issue of *Social Research*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Winter 1985). Jean Cohen noted that new social movements emerged from civil society rather than mass institutions and that their unwillingness to make formal calculations vis-a-vis the state effectively placed them outside the resource-mobilization paradigm.

Finally, Enrique Larana, Hank Johnston and Joseph Gusfield pose eight characteristics of new social movements including a social base that transcends class structure, pluralism of ideas and values, new dimensions of identity, and autonomy from political parties. See their edited volume, *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity* (Temple University Press, 1994).

Locked in debate, the more that postmodernists and Marxists contest each other's assumptions and ideas, the less likely they are to elicit what could be mutually beneficial insights offered by those they define as their intellectual opponent. At their extremes, both become mechanical responses, not dialectical ones, to rapid change. As the adherents of each position become rigid, prospects for clarification of reality dim. Postmodernism is often written off as an academic fad replete with a jargon of discourse inaccessible to all but a select few, and Marxists are dismissed as dinosaurs. While mechanical Marxists fail to appreciate the radical gap between modernity and post-modernity, crippling their capacity to understand the contemporary world, many post-modernists are unable to link their empirical understanding of the decentered autonomy of local contexts to history, leaving them incapable of articulating a transcendental vision for the future.<sup>6</sup>

In the current atmosphere of recrimination and contestation for hegemony, it is difficult to criticize the politics of identity while simultaneously retaining a sense of their radical potential. Many Marxists lament the appearance of identity politics. They see it as shattering the promise of proletarian universalism, but they miss the latent universality present in new social movements. Identity construction can be a form of enacting the freedom to determine one's conditions of existence, to create new categories within which to live. While the many dimensions of this dynamic are fragmentary, a totality of such quests can eventually become a radically new concrete universal – a reworking of the meaning of human being.

Unlike economic categories imposed by production and social relations, these new categories can be autonomously formulated – or, at a minimum, they are vehicles for the autonomy of groups oppressed by existing structures. The logic of the established system is to enforce particularisms as a means of social control. By bringing control and power to minorities and women, identity politics can be a form of self-defense. As Anthony Appiah expressed it:

<sup>6</sup> For a critical reading of postmodernism, see "In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda", special issue of *Monthly Review* (July/August 1995). Surprisingly, the entire double issue contains only a single paragraph dealing with economic dimensions of contemporary reality, usually MR's specialty.

And if one is to be Black in a society that is racist then one has to deal constantly with assaults on one's dignity. In this context, insisting on the right to live a dignified life will not be enough. It will not even be enough to require being treated with equal dignity despite being Black, for that will require a concession that being Black counts naturally or to some degree against one's dignity. And so one will end up asking to be respected *as a Black*.<sup>7</sup>

When Republicans assault affirmative action and abortion rights, they condition responses from minorities and women reinforcing their group's freedom from encroachment of outside interests.

No matter how much they respond to intrusive outsiders, each form of identity politics contains a latent universality. Gender equality is a universal aim, benefitting all of us. The celebration of racial diversity and mutual recognition of our humanity is in all our interests. Unlocking sexual repression and an end to the compulsory channelling of libido into exclusive heterosexuality benefits all. Cleaning up the environment and disarming the world's nation-states is in the interest of all humanity. At their best, autonomous movements (like Italian *Autonomia* or the German *Autonomen*<sup>8</sup>) bring these latent connections to consciousness and accentuate the universal content of single-issue identity politics. The function of revolutionary theory is not to persuade feminists and nationalists to give up their particularisms but to aid the development from within these streams of a new concrete universalism, one produced by immanent critiques – not imposed from the outside. As part of the struggle for the reformulation of the concrete universal, members of autonomous movements must be willing to risk being called racist for challenging the exclusivity of black oppression, sexist for challenging women to confront class reality, anti-Semitic for demanding that Jews do not treat themselves as a chosen people. It is not incumbent upon them to admire fawningly extreme varieties of Afrocentrism, types of feminism that advocate abstinence from heterosexual relations,

<sup>7</sup> K. Anthony Appiah, "Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction," in *Multiculturalism* edited by Amy Gutmann (Princeton University Press, 1994) p. 161.

<sup>8</sup> See my forthcoming *The Subversion of Politics: Civil Luddites and the Decolonization of Everyday Life* (Humanities Press, 1997).

or uncritical phylosemitism.

The present fragmentation of social movements preconditions a universal identity of human beings as a species – not as nations, genders or races – an end point that can only be achieved by going through, not ignoring or treating as "secondary" categories of oppression imposed upon us by a system based on heteronomous control (externally inflicted). The road from the abstract universal of "modernist" thought (the positing of a proletarian or other form of universality which corresponded to that of white males) to the future formulation of a concrete multicultural universal necessarily passes through identity politics. Unlike the proletariat, no one identity is the vast majority of society, nor is one by itself able to stop the functioning of the system and reconstruct it. Therefore multiple centers of revolutionary thought and action are historical necessities posing the features of a decentered future society in the making. Identity politics begin the process of unlocking the structures of domination, a process which might eventually result in deconstructing ascriptive identities entirely and reformulating ourselves as autonomous human beings essentially free of externally imposed shackles.

Most analysts of new social movements entirely miss this point. One of the distinguishing characteristics of new social movements, at least as the term is commonly used in academic and research circles, is their specialization, their existence as a fragmentary critique of society, often as little more than interest-group politics conducted by non-traditional means. Accordingly, the anti-nuclear power movement, for example, deals exclusively with the issue of nuclear power plants and nuclear waste disposal. Attempts to link that movement with the feminist movement's call for a new technology based not on the domination and destruction of the environment but on a harmonious relationship with Nature are thought to combine two different movements.<sup>9</sup> The Black movement similarly is understood as having little to do with ecology when in fact, in the 1990's in the U.S., it took the lead in green activism.<sup>10</sup>

New social movement theory may be accurate in describing

<sup>9</sup> One source which demonstrates ecofeminism's breadth is Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein's *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (Sierra Club Books, 1990).

<sup>10</sup> See Patrick Novotny's discussion of the "Gulf Coast Tenants' Organization and the SouthWest Organizing Project" in *New Political Science* #32 (Summer 1995).

the forms that actions take when observed by outsiders, but it fails to comprehend the sources of protests and the ways in which synchronic movements can form an organic whole.<sup>11</sup> Most significantly, its compartmentalization of new social movements theoretically obliterates in advance the possibility of transforming society as a whole, thereby insidiously maintaining the status quo. Within the vast domain of the literature on "new social movements" in the U.S., fragmented pressure groups become real, and the universal reality of revolutionary social movements "untrue." As Margit Mayer described social movement research in the U.S.:

Disaggregated and issue – specific movements that refrain from totalizing their demands flourish all over this country, but movements demanding radical societal change have always remained relatively marginal. Such radical or socialist currents were once again even more marginalized by their omission in social movement research. Questions pertaining to their development and dynamic hardly appear in recent American social movement research.<sup>12</sup>

In my view, the current fragmentation of social movements is a transitional phenomenon, a response both to the conservative character of these times and to the historic restructuring of global capitalism. The most salient feature of identity politics, the fragmentation of constituency, arose after the popular movement of the 1960's had disintegrated. As the unifying effects of the revolutionary upsurge subsided and the forces set in motion continued along separate paths, the system's logic of compartmentalization and atomization asserted itself within the opposition. The distance from the New Left – the myriad of organizations and individuals that converged in 1968 to form

<sup>11</sup> The voluminous literature on the theory of new social movements is itself the subject of articles and books. A good attempt to contextualize theory and practice since the 1960s is the last chapter of Barbara Epstein's *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s* (University of California Press, 1991). An anthology which contains empirical observations on Germany is Roland Roth and Dieter Rucht (editors), *Neue Soziale Bewegungen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> Margit Mayer, "Social Movement Research in the United States: A European Perspective," p. 474.

what I've called a world historical movement – to identity politics is partially the difference between the existence of a popular movement challenging the world system and the defeat of that upsurge and dispersal of its many components.

In manifestos like the Port Huron statement, the early New Left spoke of universal needs like increasing democracy but framed its discussions abstractly – without any real understanding of racism and sexism. Like Soviet Communists, they were incapable of integrating racism and patriarchy into their analysis of society. When SNCC expelled white activists in 1965, they sang the first stanza in the contemporary chorus of identity politics. Passing through the phase of Black Power – the prototypical formulation of identity politics – a new concrete universal appeared momentarily at the Black Panther Party's Revolutionary Peoples Constitutional Convention.<sup>13</sup>

To Todd Gitlin, identity politics is an unfortunate consequence of this later phase of the New Left. Like other historians whose roots are in the early phase of the movement, he fails to comprehend this history entirely, in part because he dropped out of the movement when it entered its radical phase. For Gitlin and others, identity politics is a term used to establish a hierarchy of importance that prioritizes new social movements over those defined as universalistic. He believes identity politics lead to struggles that are not against the "real enemy." For Gitlin:

... the proliferation of identity politics leads to a turning inward, a grim and hermetic bravado which takes the ideological form of paranoid, jargon-clotted postmodernist groupthink, cult celebrations of victimization, and stylized marginality.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Many activists from the early New Left, particularly those who subsequently became historians, were uninvolved then, and their histories pay little or no attention to the more than 10,000 participants in that gathering in Philadelphia who experienced the energy of commonality amid difference. The documents from the Revolutionary Peoples' Constitutional Convention reveal that identity politics complete with autonomous female and black groups can indeed formulate universally transcendent visions. These were small first steps, but the library full of debates about the promise of identity politics would be enriched by consulting this instance of historical praxis. See *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (South End Press, 1987) pp. 203, 265-279.

<sup>14</sup> Todd Gitlin, "Fragmentation of the Idea of the Left," in Craig Calhoun (editor) *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Blackwell, 1994) p. 166.

To be sure, identity politics contains their own internal contradictions: Within every form they take are both a universalistic promise and a particularistic chauvinism (In his life, Malcolm X contained both within himself). A failure to comprehend the contradictory character of identity politics unites both their advocates and opponents. Identity politics can keep the movement divided against itself (as Gitlin understands) or point to one structure of domination and overlook another. They can also obscure the existence of a common class enemy – the wealthiest families, top managers and their corporations and governments. By themselves, identity politics are not sufficient to transform qualitatively problematic political-economic structures. Indeed, not only are they insufficient for the formulation of a revolutionary transcendence of the class-structured multinational corporate world system, they sometimes conceal that very system by seeking to treat as identical a variety of people who occupy very different positions within the system.<sup>15</sup>

In an epoch when capital's velocity and mobility are at unprecedented levels, identity politics reflect the fragmentation of the proletariat's universal subjectivity. To the extent that material conditions affect social consciousness, the dispersal of production, the adaptation of capitalist principles to all the major institutions of society, and the commodification of everyday life condition the fragmentation of proletarian subjectivity.<sup>16</sup> Under

<sup>15</sup> By constructing the identity "female," for example, to conflate the interests of New York's super-wealthy women and the poorest women of Bombay, enormous differences are obscured, and the world system of stratification unthematized.

In 1991, the United Nations reported that the top one-fifth of the world's population controlled 83% of its total wealth and the bottom one-fifth only 1.4%. The difference between the world's rich and poor had roughly doubled in thirty years. Alongside 202 billionaires, more than one billion people lived in the worst poverty and 400 million were close to starvation. The average per capita income in the South (the Third World) in 1987 was \$670 compared to a corresponding figure of \$12,000 in the North. See Walter Corson (editor), *The Global Ecology Handbook* (Beacon Press, 1990) p. 44.

Identity politics can be a means of glossing over this crucial schism in the world, a means of turning attention to the needs of those at the top in relation to each other, not in relation to the whole. As observed in my case studies of autonomous women's movements, however, Italian and German feminists recognized that emancipation within the corporate world is not the same as liberation from it. See my forthcoming *The Subversion of Politics*.

<sup>16</sup> Frances Fox Piven's discussion at the American Political Science Association meetings in 1993 was a significant stimulus to this insight.

post-Fordist conditions, capital's global nature makes the seizure of national political power increasingly superfluous (as the fates of Cuba, Vietnam and Nicaragua indicate). Immanuel Wallerstein has formulated this notion as the transition from the state to civil society as object of transformation. Even within the world of corporations, the demographic reconstruction of the working class calls for a multicultural analysis. The working class does not consist predominantly of white, European males (since production is increasingly global and everywhere involves women and non-whites). They understand cooperation as global and multicultural, not simply "social" in terms of the immediate community. To the extent they become revolutionary, their international commitment will be to ecology, feminism, racial solidarity and peace, not any nation-state. Seen in this context, identity politics provide the basis for a free society worthy of the name. They are a necessary step in the development of a new universality that recognizes race and gender as significant domains of a broader historical framework. They are necessary to deconstruct these structures of domination in everyday life.

Making the case for the potential universality of identity politics does not mean that I project their categories as eternally valid. Every time I travel to Germany, the fact that racial categories are socially constructed becomes palpably clear to me. I leave the United States as a white person, but when I land in Germany, my Mediterranean features mean that I am a "person of color" (most commonly thought to be a Turk). By referring to my experiences in Germany, I point to the larger reality that race and racism are social constructions, not essential dimensions of the human condition. This statement should not be interpreted to mean that race is inconsequential. Rather, recognizing the social dimension of categories of identity is a step in their transformation.