

Johanna Fernández, Danae Gallo González, Veronika Zink (eds.)

W(h)ither Identity

Positioning the Self and Transforming the Social

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E-Mail: wvt@wvttrier.de

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A TRIBUTE TO IDENTITY? RECONSIDERING POST-IDENTITARIAN NOTIONS

VERONIKA ZINK, JOHANNA FERNÁNDEZ, DANAE GALLO GONZÁLEZ

1. Decomposing Identities

Addressing the concept of ‘cultural identity’ means simultaneously entering a political, social, cultural, and theoretical minefield. Against the backdrop of current cultural developments that are commonly labeled ‘multiculturalism,’ ‘transnational mobility,’ and ‘cultural diversity,’ among other terms, identity has become an increasingly contested concept in political activism, art practice, and academic criticism over the past decades. Cultural identity appears to be a rather suspicious concept, running the risk of either falling back on cultural essentialisms or prompting a radical or even naïve constructivism. While the former is founded on underlying beliefs in certain core properties and defining characteristics of social difference such as gender, race, sexuality, ability, class, etc., the latter maintains an arbitrariness of social categories and relativizes every position, be it hegemonic or subaltern, within differential, societal structures. But no matter how contested the concept of identity is, identity still stands at the core of debates about articulations of the self, the self’s position within social formations, and formulations of community. Certainly, these debates are not mere theoretical encounters with the question of identity, but are above all political endeavors in questioning prevalent identity politics, liberating oneself and others from social subjection and exceeding the reproduction of societal inequalities. Destabilizing existing notions of cultural identity thus means challenging the social structure, its underlying power relations as well as dominant cultural patterns of valuation.

Posing the question of identity has always been a critical issue, one that cannot be separated from the socio-political dimension. An individual subject is always already embedded in a societal power structure and a moral order that not only molds and confines the subject’s possibilities for being and acting but also offers opportunities for being effective or even creative as a social subject. The hegemony of a certain moral order, with its specific strategies of normalization, doubtlessly supports the formation and reproduction of socially conformable subjects who identify with the moral standards and are integrated in the societal order. At the same time, this hegemony evokes and opens up various forms of evasion, elusion, dissidence, resistance, and challenges to the dominance of normative standards with which subjects counter-identify. Of course, the more repressive and controlling the normative order operates, especially against marginalized subjects labeled as deviant others, the more precarious every act of dissidence becomes. These conflicts that always arise from within a given power structure have been the point of departure for discussions about cultural identity. In

this sense, subjectivation has never been an easy-going maneuver. However, facing contemporary networked society and the so-called post-political liberal project, our understanding of identity is continuously challenged anew, conceptually as well as practically.

If we give credit to social and cultural theorists, most notably Foucault (1988), we have reached far beyond a vertically repressive and disciplinary conceptualization of power. Because of this, our foremost belief in a traditional state of hermetic control and in a sovereign mode of power that runs on exclusion, domination, negation, and deception is withering – it is an unsettling of a belief system, which is now replaced by a belief in fluid microphysics of power. In this regard, we are less confronted with a liquidation of power operations than with the liquefaction of a decentralized form of power with its own mechanisms of subjectivation, specific technologies of the self and self-control, and, in short, a specific mode of “governmentality” (cf. Foucault 1991). It seems that we have said farewell to traditional, externally imposed categories and stable anchors that conditioned our identities and entered a phase of what Bauman (1996) once famously described to be a fragmented and disembedded tourist identity. In this vein, subjectivation is rather understood as an entrepreneurial endeavor of continuously rewriting (cf. Eakin 2008), recreating, and managing the self (cf. Bröckling 2007; Sennett 1998). By becoming more and more entangled, power and subjectivity no longer exist in antagonistic tension. Hence, ‘good old’ identitarian markers of being integrated or isolated, of identifying with the system or counter-identifying with the moral order, of assimilating or withdrawing from the prevalent social reality, become notably blurred (cf. Reckwitz 2010). This indissoluble relation between power and subjectivation indicates that reframing identity politics is not only conceptually complicated but also socially pivotal.

One wonders if the annulment of the belief in the dominance of an extrinsic power apparatus that conditions the cultural coding of identities is problematic per se. This is obviously a Janus-faced question. With possibilities for self-definition, the realization of the equality of status, and processes of democratization, who would like to return to a rigid class structure that predefines identity? At the same time, it would be superfluous to point out that we are far from a utopian state of righteousness. The disillusioning of our belief in worn-out identitarian categories and social differences might have extended the potentiality of integration of diverse values within our societies, but it did not solve, not even in the least, basic, existential problems of injustice, discrimination, exploitation, and oppression within and across national boundaries. In this sense, academic, artistic, and political criticism is not directed towards the ideal of equalizing the social differences conditioning one’s existence, but rather towards the make-believe realization of this ideal within neoliberal societies by pointing to empirical ramifications on the individual and the social level. Needless to say, pure forms have to be pitted against their empirical impurity.

According to Baudrillard (2001, 2008), the obsessive claim of our late modern era to equality is the result of a specific cultural strategy to annihilate all formerly pro-

duced differential intensities suspected of being nothing other than culturally created and, therefore, artificial. Following this line of argumentation, our contemporary “exorcism” (Baudrillard 2001: 2) of differential intensities fails to tackle the issues at stake, but rather invests in cosmetic surgeries. Looking behind the cultural construction of differences in order to establish a ‘true’ state of equality is, as Baudrillard would put it, nothing other than a transpolitical mode of veiling existing political and economic inequalities. Social differences have not gone astray. They have rather been transformed and disguised by what Žižek terms:

the liberal multiculturalist’s basic ideological operation: the ‘culturalization of politics’ – political differences, differences conditioned by political inequality, economic exploitation, etc., are naturalized/neutralized into ‘cultural’ differences, different ‘ways of life,’ which are something given, something that cannot be overcome, but merely ‘tolerated.’ To this, of course, one should answer in Benjaminian terms: from culturalization of politics to politicization of culture. The cause of this culturalization is the retreat, failure, of direct political solutions (Welfare State, socialist projects, etc.). Tolerance is their post-political ersatz. (2008: 660)

2. Challenging the Notion of Cultural Identity

Following Stuart Hall, identity can be understood as an “identification process [...] that is subject to the play of history and the play of difference” (1989: 15). Without reverting to traditional, irreconcilable, and pejorative differences that predetermine identities and positions in either the dominant majority or the marginalized minority, Hall’s approach enables one to understand cultural identity as evolving from differences and divergences that continuously defer and move. Identity cannot escape the endless play of *différance*. This productive interpretation of cultural differences and their intensities certainly calls for a radical openness towards the other and a subversive and liberating mode of tolerance (cf. Marcuse 1965). In practice this means that social activists advocating, for example, LGBTIQ rights have not taken to the streets to merely be accepted and equalize their positions in the societal structure but also to change living conditions and the life-world surrounding them. Such activism is never just a minority issue, because it calls for an openness of society to destabilize and change heteronormative identities as well. A subversive form of tolerance challenges every member of society. With reference to Lévi-Strauss and Dietze and her colleagues, Haschemi Yekani and Michaelis describe this openness as a mode of “wild thinking” (2007: 113), a productive form of continuously risking one’s own ontological status. Instead of living and interacting with these differential intensities and performing “identities-in-differences” (Muñoz 1999: 6), the contemporary cultivation of tolerance seems to induce exactly the opposite. The production of equality by liquidating cultural differences thus satirizes the idea of *égalité* by anemic indifference and inertia underlined by a regime of, as Marcuse (1965) would put it, “repressive tolerance” that (volitionally or not) accepts subjection.

Current modes of subjection do not merely involve the outsourcing of all forms of exploitation to the so-called Global South as an integral part of the global market economy, but they also entail a certain affirmation of subjection intrinsic to our own liberal societies. Emancipation from rigid identitarian differences certainly conjures the old hope for *liberté*, but in a very restricted and insidious manner. Within the economic condition of competitive freedom, we willingly sacrifice the potentiality of subjectivation to the production and the disciplining of the self. The subjectivation of oneself always risks subjecting oneself to and engaging in the reproduction of economic and political inequalities. We witness a desire for a self-imposed enslavement, as Deleuze and Guattari (2009) would have it, which complicates every attempt to conceptualize resistance to repressive identity politics from below.

The so-called loss of an oedipal figure to object against certainly challenges the possibilities of thinking resistance and opposition in any clear cut way. Moreover, it is never only a question of who or what to resist but also how, with whom, and for whom. The disenchantment of primordial, traditional, and universalistic codes for “the construction of collective identity” (Eisenstadt/Giesen 1995) affects forms of community formation and the possibilities of solidarity – to avoid the term *fraternité*. During the rise of the network society (cf. Castells 2009), the demand for cultural belonging was substituted by a demand for contingent and partial social identifications as well as fluid social ties that are permanently in the making. The point is not to once again engage with the often-cited discourse of individualization, but rather to take this flat ontology of an interconnected sociality as a starting point for reframing our notion of cultural identity as well as its potentialities and limitations. The sociality of networking opens up spaces of contact and perpetually facilitates global politics of friendship (cf. Derrida 2005; Gandhi 2005). Concurrently, the image of a network society conjures dystopian science-fiction visions foreseeing the withering of sociality in favor of a connected world constituted by “terminal identities” (Bukatman 1993) that rather serve as input-output devices of information and data to keep the network working instead of engaging in meaningful relations and social exchange (cf. Baudrillard 1993). Apart from devoting oneself to either a hoped-for or a catastrophic vision of the social, lived solidarity has to be understood as the measure for the power of all forms of collectivization, be they globally interconnected grassroots and protest movements, such as Occupy, or transnational alliances and associations of states, such as the European Union. Regarding the latter, and the question of a European identity, one wonders whether the case of Greece might prove an old hip-hop lyric by *Terminator X* to be well-founded: “Whether it’s rainy or snowy or sunny, funny, but it all comes down to the money.”

As a matter of fact, one could echo Tocqueville’s vision of democracy, wherein people are “more than kings, and less than men” (2002 [1835/1840]: 773), wherein “[subjection] does not drive men to resistance, but [...] crosses them at every turn, till they are led to surrender the exercise of their will” (ibid.: 772), and wherein “[e]ach of them, living apart, is as a stranger to the fate of all the rest” (ibid.: 770). This realiza-