

Foreword

In the humanities and social sciences, identity has become a popular lens through which to analyse social and political changes. This is partly in response to research done in anthropology, psychology and sociology and a result of new interdisciplinary research. It is also due to developments on the political left where there has been a shift from class and interests to the recognition of a plurality of identities. The study of identities has moved from taking identities as the expression of underlying, sometimes essential, interests to seeing identities as the temporary outcomes of contingent processes of identification. This is the issue on the Marxist and post-Marxist left where a key division remains between those who argue that class is just one identity among others and those—now fewer and fewer—who argue that we need to return to class in order to understand contemporary capitalism. Another expression of the move from (class) interests to identity is the parallel move from a politics of redistribution to the politics of recognition.

What is more, it is now commonplace that individual persons are situated at the intersection of sometimes competing identities, so that no individual is exhausted by a single identity. For instance, in his book on Europe, “The Other Heading”, Jacques Derrida declares himself to be a European, but also both more and less than that: “I am European, I am no doubt a European intellectual ... But I am not, nor do I feel, European in every part, that is, European through and through. ... I do not want to be and must not be European through and through, European in every part”. There is no single identity that corresponds to the name of Jacques Derrida; he is at one and the same time European, Algerian, French, Jew, atheist, male, Parisian, heterosexual, and so forth. This multifaceted character of our identities raises the spectre of intersectional discrimination and oppression where one form of oppression reinforces another. However, even if we are oppressed in more than one way at a time, and even if those dimensions of oppression reinforce one another, there is always the possibility that another part of our identity escapes this oppression.

If identities are the temporary outcomes of contingent processes of identification, we should not speak of identity politics but of the politics of identity. If identities are constituted in an open-ended process, and if there is nothing essential about them, then it matters how an identity becomes articulated and by whom. It becomes a matter of politics, not confined to what we usually understand as political

institutions, but in the sense that identities are constituted through a process of negotiation where that process of negotiation is the very medium through which the identities are constituted. Thus, for instance, Derrida asks about Europe: ‘to what concept, to what real individual, to what singular entity should this name [‘Europe’] be assigned today? Who will draw up its borders?’ If there is no essence to Europe, it matters how it gets represented and by whom, for instance who gets to write its constitution and what goes in there.

As the evidence from this volume shows, the identities of migrants are also contingent, in a constant process of re-articulation and inherently linked to processes of inclusion and exclusion. Migrants migrate—across territories and borders of all sorts. Their identities migrate with them, but are also rearticulated in the process. So are the territories and borders across which they migrate. That is, not only the identity of the migrant, but also the identity of the ‘host’ country or city is rearticulated when people move from one place to another. As MariaCaterina La Barbera notes in her introduction to the volume, it is important to divorce the image of the migrant from the image of the foreigner who arrives at *our* home, as if their identity—and their difference—can be reduced to their difference from *us*. If we think of identity—whether the identity of an individual or a group, a country or a city—as a contingent and open-ended process of identification, we can think of identity in terms of migrating. It is not just the case that identity and migration are inherently linked, and that therefore we must study the two together; it is also the case that any identity is constantly migrating. This is one way in which we can try to break with the dichotomy of “home” and “away”. The point here is not that we can be at home anywhere and everywhere, but that we are never at home. If my identity, as well as that of the country or city where I live and work, is never fully constituted, the very sense of home and being at home is dislocated. There can be no being-at-home because neither the identity and borders of the home nor my own identity can be identified in a determinate way.

What is more, we should avoid the image of an “I”—or a “we”—that negotiates its way through different identifications, as if the subject and its identity could be separated. My identity is constituted through both self- and other-representations, but that distinction between self- and other-representations must also be put into question. Identities are constituted at the level of representation, and we should not think of representations as secondary to, and a reflection of, a non-representational reality. We can therefore think of the politics of identity as a politics of representation: what representations become dominant, and whose representations are they? Self-representations are always also other-representations because they are only felicitous in so far as they draw on existing representations and are taken up, and repeated, by others. My self-representations are never simply mine. If that is the case, the same goes for my identity and subjectivity; these are always-already dispersed in a web of signification, or representation where no agent is fully sovereign. That closes off one possible route for the critique of the way in which, for instance, migrants are represented: we cannot oppose the allegedly authentic self-representations of an individual or group to the allegedly distorted other-representations of them. My identity, and the language through which I represent it, is never simply

my own, never proper to me, never my property alone, and so there is no proper way to represent me.

That may seem like an impasse for critique, but it also opens up the possibility that identities may be re-appropriated by being re-articulated in new ways. This is precisely what is evident in the chapters in this volume: how migrant identities are constituted through an open-ended and contingent process of re-appropriating and re-articulating them. The *hijab* is a good example (see Chap. 14 and 15). If we take representations as constitutive, and if there are no pure self-representations, then the critique of representations of the *hijab* cannot proceed by way of comparing those representations to either an essential meaning of the *hijab* or to the authentic self-representations of those wearing the *hijab*. However, that does not mean that critique becomes impossible, only that it must proceed in a different register. Critique now proceeds by way of opposing one representation to another, showing the contingency of each representation while also seeking to articulate new representations and make those representations hegemonic.

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