

# Proud to be ... So what?

## Identity is the forced community of individuals

When the term identity is applied to a person, a reasonable interpretation would be to understand it as signifying their self-awareness as a thinking entity in a material body, both of which – in this dyadic union – are forced to endure a great deal in this society already, well before acquiring the capacity of even thinking in such terms. But all humans are also branded with another type of identity: They are combined into groups according to their ‘sex’, gender, nationality, ‘race’, sexual desire and a plethora of other categories. This is more than just a harmless indication of a person’s physical characteristics, the pigmentation of their skin or whom they happen to be in love with. To a considerable degree, this sorting influences one’s material circumstances, psychological state and even the duration of one’s existence.

## “One is not born a woman, but becomes one”

With this truth, feminist critics have unmasked the differences asserted by various (social) groups as socially constructed, well over sixty years ago. Without fail, all people are subsumed under any given number of collective identities. They are ascribed qualities and behavioural patterns which are attributed to their alleged ‘essence’. Predications of ethnicity, gender, ‘race’, sexual orientation, (dis)ability or class manifest themselves as essentialist judgements. The people in question are subjected to binding statements which aim at fundamentally defining their lives, their thoughts as well as their actions. In that process they are being differentiated from one part of humanity while a strong bond is constructed with another, with whom they are supposed to share a common fate. Many of these statements are simply false (“all black men have large penises”), some are undue generalisations (“all British people drink warm beer” and “all Canadians wear tuques”), and even where a particular attribution actually does characterise a large number of people (“homo homini lupus”), it is socially produced.

All this is not the same as saying that “all footballers are idiots,” which would be no more than a polemic conclusion, equating a social practice with someone’s propensity for reasoning, in order to attack a sports craze. One can stop playing football at any time, while one cannot stop being black. An attribution based purely on social practice is a distinctly different thing than one based on someone’s supposed nature<sup>1</sup>. As soon as an essentialist judgement has been coined and socially established, the people affected by it have no choice but to react to it: judgements must be refuted, positively or negatively adopted – or criticised. In some cases, the affected groups may even break up into sub-collectives in the course of the debate over different strategies of response. These judgements are all the more severe wherever they are part of strategies of discrimination or even form the legitimisation for the exclusion or oppression of a particular group. That is wherever such judgements are taken as proof for any given group’s inferiority and serve as the basis for their subjugation.

## **“We draw our power from the stream against which we swim”**

Any member of such groups is faced with the existence of these judgements. They are not only part of a social practice that is directed against them, but they are present even in their own self-perception, their fears and desires. These judgements are generally present in people's minds: they are uttered, hinted at, widely believed and thereby reproduced not only by members of the hegemonic culture but by those who themselves belong to the oppressed group in question, as well. No-one has a choice but to acknowledge these judgements and to deal with them. How one deals with them, however, is not equally definite. They can be accepted or refuted, given positive or negative connotations, one can distance themselves from them individually or accept them as a general truth, or they can be explained and fought as one part of an objectionable whole. Wherever people strive to end their own oppression, a fundamental critique of its legitimisation is key. Here are only a few examples of movements (respectively the vast majority of those movements, leaving aside the few less affirmative political approaches in the mentioned movements) which failed to effectively formulate this essential critique on a consensual basis<sup>2</sup>:

The working class opposed the theories of the tutelage of the “dangerous classes” and the necessary barbarism of the working poor by singing the praises of the lower classes' productivity in a direct critique of the non-working classes. With this, the proletariat in the West achieved legitimate status as part of the nation<sup>3</sup>; an achievement, however, which did not mark the beginning but rather the end of the socialist branch of the workers' movement and ultimately reduced class struggle to a fight over wage levels instead of fighting against being the economically exploited ones always.

The Women's Rights Movement demanded equality for women as citizens, discovered women's integral role for any society and challenged their reduction to objects of sexual desire and biological reproduction by championing the fight for recognition of women as subjects with the ability and the right to make their own decisions and the capacity of defining their own ends. Some parts of the feminist movement that do even question an adaptation to the status quo in general propagate a female counter-society.

The African-American Civil Rights Movement in the United States refuted the claim of their natural inferiority with the discovery that history has known many artists and warriors with a heavier skin pigmentation, that Africa is the origin of civilisation and that black is beautiful. Their achievement was that black men and women are legally equally free to forge their own proverbial destiny. The inevitable disappointment over the limits of this kind of freedom and the still widespread practical racism finds an adequate expression in the shape of the “Black Muslim” movement, namely by demanding a racially pure nation in its own right.

Since the first Christopher Street Day, the Gay Rights Movement has held that being gay is a reason to be 'proud'. By coming out in droves to get their marriage licenses wherever possible, large parts of the gay community have dispelled all rumours alleging their inherent inability to commit due to a solipsistic narcissism, supposedly essential to homosexuality. At the same time, the persevering myth of homosexual effeminacy is being refuted by displays of gay machismo and military prowess around the world. The message is: 'real men' love 'real men'. It is no coincidence that nowadays there are even gay and lesbian Tories: Thereby proving that most gays

do not want to fight a society that produces homophobia – but to overcome the discrimination by being a perfect part of that very same society.

As a result of the rampant anti-Semitism of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Jewish communities of Europe and North America were roughly divided into Zionists, who strove to find a safe new home for this ‘unrooted nation’, on the one side, and, on the other, ‘citizens of the Jewish faith’, who refused to split their loyalties between a Jewish state and their country of birth. These are the two major positions<sup>4</sup>. Today, many in contemporary Israeli society take issue with the production of a collective identity based on religious denomination. The Social-Democratic successors of the originally Socialist Zionist movement more often than not find themselves in the position of having to share government with religious zealots.

All these cases have in common that it was neither the division into groups as such, nor the reasons for this division, let alone the structure of society itself, that were challenged, but merely the results these divisions produce. The goal of all of the movements mentioned above is first and foremost their own integration into the respective hegemonic societies. Wherever this is prevented by the rules of said societies, it produces segregationist movements in their own right, whose new goal is the creation of another community altogether, in which their group will then be the majority.

## **“I wasn’t born there / Perhaps I’ll die there / There’s no place left to go, San Francisco.”**

Since the focus of this text is on identity politics as a means of liberation, the identity politics of the ‘oppressors’ will only feature as a negative. All those who are not or have not been fully recognised as proper subjects of the law have to distance or differentiate themselves from this identity politics of the majority. They have to in order to be able to fundamentally change the conditions which produce such attributions.

To do this, it is not enough to simply understand the problem. The realisation that these attributions and the divisions they produce are socially constructed does not by itself put an end to their internalisation. The unease with which a worker faces a bureaucrat; the willingness to accept an abusive partner, simply because “stand by your man” is such a nice motto; the hatred of one’s own dark skin, produced by a white ideal of beauty; the fear of losing one’s family as a result of coming-out; the presence of anti-Semitic stereotypes even in Jewish communities: These are only a few common examples illustrating the tenacity of these ideologies. People continually judge not only others but also themselves based on the norms laid out by a bourgeois, white, heterosexual, healthy, male world. Even a simple inversion (gay pride, black power etc.) presupposes a general adherence to these norms. They are reflected even in the deepest fears and/or desires of the individual (e.g. female menstruation, male fear of penetration, sexual attraction based on skin colour).

The prerequisite for overcoming these practices is the formulation of an appropriate critique. However, under the current conditions it seems highly unlikely, if not impossible, for this internalisation to disappear completely. On the one hand, these categories are so closely linked to self-constitution that transcending them is a process that is both painful and laborious. On the other hand, even if an individual manages to overcome these attributions, they remain the basis for a host of social practices that one cannot individually withdraw from – not even in form of a counter-culture – since they are still determining factors for the actions of other people all around

oneself. They are present in mass culture, in the autobiographic stories and concepts of others. This ubiquity engenders experiences of non-belonging: Every time someone speaks about what is common and acceptable, they are distinctly not speaking about me. I am an unforeseen anomaly.

It is this constant state of alienation, produced by the social practices of authority and people alike, which makes it so hard for most to deviate from the norm and even deters some from doing so entirely. It is the same feeling which makes alternative communities and sub-cultures appear so attractive. They are free spaces in which people share the same experiences of oppression and ostracism: You are not alone. Many activists and people on the Left are familiar with this scenario, as well. The knowledge that one is not completely isolated in one's deviant opinions and practices may not be necessary for a critical assessment of the status quo, but it most certainly does not hurt. The feeling of not having to start every discussion or argument at square one and the confirmation that it is okay to be the way you are provide a considerable degree of comfort. Strength in numbers is certainly also helpful when it comes to putting shared critical theories into socio-political practice. But, at the same time, giving in to this desire for normalcy means abandoning the process of probing all desires and behaviour for their rational foundation – a process which is indispensable for an emancipated life. The truth of an argument does not rely on the number of people who believe it.

## **Don't you need society?**

Such is the crux of all politics of affirmation – that is any politics whose goal it is to facilitate the emancipation of oppressed groups by affirming and empowering the members of such groups in their respective collective identities. The best outcome of such an endeavour, short of founding one's own hegemonic society, is a successful integration into the existing one. It is no accident that the development of counter-identities seems to always be accompanied by constant calls for adaptation from within as well as demands for respecting the choices of those members of the group who have already adapted. Accordingly, 'Community' representatives are often masters at self-critically accepting the acknowledgement of the demands of the mainstream as a necessary condition for the integrative process.

The other problem is the regressive tendency towards a homogenisation of subcultures or, in other words, the tendency to turn deviant behaviour into a brand new norm in its own right, be it a specific dress code or allegations of betrayal, should someone dare to stray from the flock and have, say, a heterosexual affair. Not least is the active positive connotation of this 'other' essentialism: members of oppressed groups often differ very little from representatives of the mainstream in terms of linking their identity to nature. Tautological claims like "I am what I am" are common occurrences.

## **Liberté, Égalité, Propriété for all?**

Any group campaigning for equal rights is demanding nothing else than the recognition of its members as full citizens of the nation and as equal competitors. Bourgeois society with its promises of equality before the law and general competition seems more than happy to oblige. But even if all legitimisations for their oppression were to be removed or at least considerably mitigated, their identities would retain the potential for the same violence with which they were originally inscribed. Even when it does not manifest itself in outright hatred, terror, or destruction, the stigma of difference itself remains unchanged. It can be (re)produced at will and directed once

more against its bearers. For all these reasons, adapting to the demands of bourgeois society is hardly ever an efficient means of emancipation.

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## Footnotes

[1](#) This is not say that one can or should always differentiate whether a given identity is natural or a social practice. Among ourselves we disagree whether any classification into groups already deserves critique or not. What we agree on however is the critique of any essentialist classification which entails domination of the classified.

[2](#) Just to make it a little harder to misread: The following movements are listed in order to analyse a common mistake when challenging a discrimination against a group. It is not the subject of this article to identify the content of racism, anti-Semitism, sexism etc.

[3](#) On a critique of referring positively to one's nation, see "Why anti-national?" at the beginning of this edition.

[4](#) There are a few others with yet another approach, like strongly religious anti-Zionists, who oppose the foundation of a state of Israel before the return of the messiah.