Identity Politics as a Transposition of Fraser's Needs Politics

Peg Tittle

ptittle7@gmail.com
www.pegtittle.com

Abstract

By transposing Nancy Fraser's theory of needs politics to identity politics, I hope to broaden our understanding of identity claims.

Fraser argues that the politics of needs is comprised of three distinct but interrelated moments: (1) the struggle to establish or deny the political status of a given need, that is, the struggle to validate the need as a matter of legitimate political concern; (2) the struggle over the interpretation of the need, the struggle for the power to define it and, so, to determine what would satisfy it; and (3) the struggle over the satisfaction of the need. Transposed, these become a definition of identity politics, each aspect of which is explored: (1) the struggle to legitimate the identity; (2) the struggle to define the identity; and (3) the struggle to satisfy the identity.

Remarking on the juxtaposition of a discourse about needs with discourses about rights and interests, Fraser formulates several important questions, three of which here simplified and transposed to identity: (1) Why has identity-talk become so prominent? (2) What are the major varieties of identity-talk? (3) What opportunities and/or obstacles does the identity idiom pose for movements interested in social transformation? I consider these questions with respect to identity politics and present answers to each, thus furthering a philosophical analysis of identity politics.

In her essay on the politics of needs, "Talking About Needs: Interpretive Contests as Political Conflicts in Welfare-State Societies," Nancy Fraser takes an approach that focuses not on the needs but on the discourses about needs. She does this in order to "bring into view the contextual and contested character of needs claims" (Fraser 292). This resonates with Iris Young's approach: she too argues that the distributive paradigm, focusing as it does on the goods themselves, "tends to ignore the social structure and institutional context that often help determine distributive patterns" (15) of those goods. And, insofar as identity is a social construct,[1] context consideration is essential.

Needs claims, says Fraser, "tend to be nested, connected to one another in ramified chains of 'in-order-to' relations" (293). I think it's helpful to see identity claims as having the same relational structure: instead of 'A needs x in order to y,' we have 'A needs to be recognized as x (by self and/or by others) in order to y.' It seems that often the 'y' is a form of self-esteem--one needs to be recognized as hindu or lesbian so as not to have to stay in the closet about it. However, one may need to be recognized as white or black in order to announce the privileges one has unfairly received or been denied. A differently-abled person may need to be recognized as such in order to get certain facilities of access.

Fraser considers the politics of needs to comprise of three distinct but interrelated moments (294): (1) the struggle to establish or deny the political status of a given need, that is, the struggle to validate the need as a matter of legitimate political concern; (2) the struggle over the interpretation of the need, the struggle for the power to define it and, so, to determine what would satisfy it; (3) the struggle over the satisfaction of the need. Transposed to identity, these moments become (1) the struggle to legitimate the identity; (2) the struggle to define the identity; (3) the struggle to satisfy the identity.

With respect to the first moment, the struggle to establish the status of an identity, the need to legitimize seems to exist in direct proportion to power imbalances. Fraser's 'where there is an inequality, there is needs-talk' (296) becomes 'where there is an inequality, there is identity-talk.'

Struggles to legitimate native status, for example, have occurred, not unsurprisingly therefore, in the context of national power imbalances; struggles to legitimate gay/lesbian status have occurred in the context of sociopolitical power imbalances; and the struggle to legitimate the status of 'single mother' has occurred in the context of personal economic power imbalances.

However, whereas Fraser sees needs-talk appearing "as a site of struggle where groups with unequal discursive (and non-discursive) resources compete to establish as hegemonic their respective interpretations of legitimate social needs" (296), I think identity-talk is more one-sided: identity-talk seems to characterize only the subordinate or oppositional groups--the dominant group doesn't need to identify itself, because what its members are is the norm, the given, the assumed.[2] In a white-dominant society, it is black people who identify themselves, as black; likewise, in a heterosexual-dominant society, it is homosexual people who identify themselves, as homosexual. Interestingly, not only do the subordinate groups identify themselves, they also identify the other, the dominant groups that didn't need to identify themselves: the identity 'WASP' was, I believe, the creation of *non*-white, *non*-anglosaxon people; likewise, the term 'male chauvinist' was created by female feminists.

With respect to the second moment, the struggle to define, the central issue seems to be '*who* does the defining?' As Young makes clear, group meanings which partially constitute people's identities may have been forced upon them (44). So while, as described in the preceding paragraph, the subordinate group, rather than the dominant group, identifies itself and then the other, the dominant group merely identifies the other. And when this is the case, the identities tend to be negative identities. Consider the identity '*dis*abled,' given by the dominant group to the other, the subordinate: the identity is expressed in terms of what the subordinate group does *not* have that the dominant group *does* have. And consider that 'male chauvinist' was not, instead, 'non-female non-feminist.' Often, however, the 'negativing' is not explicit; nevertheless, I think it is still present: when a white person identifies a black person as 'black,' the implication is 'not white,' whereas when a black person identifies him/herself as black, there is no such 'lack of' implication.

Given that one's identity may have been forced upon one by another, an important question is whether or not one can change that identity. Amelie Rorty and David Wong argue that one *can* reject one's

social role and/or one's group identity, but they concede that "the relations we bear to the social structures that influence our identities are often ambiguous and indeterminate" (30). Further, say Rorty and Wong, social contexts may place significant objective and subjective constraints on the development and exercise of an individual's 'ideal' traits:

> "Even when ideal traits are specifiable independently of any particular social roles, social contexts place significant objective and subjective constraints on their development and exercise. An individual's attempt to discount the centrality of group identity can often fail. The attempt to diminish the significance of race, ethnicity, or gender is often treated as itself a focal expression of the very identity whose centrality is denied. For example, blacks or African-Americans are now often called upon to give race relative dominance over other aspects of their identity. Even if an individual African-American subjectively attempts to discount race and to stress his ideal identity, his refusal to privilege race identity is often socially interpreted as a form of racism. He may be charged with identifying with the oppressor, and he is likely to be continuously role-cast in ways that can override the centrality that he attempted to accord to his ideal identity." (28-29)

Steven Epstein points out a similar 'catch 22' talking also about change, but at the group level rather than at the individual level: "Just as blacks cannot fight the arbitrariness of racial classification without organizing *as blacks*, so gays could not advocate the overthrow of the sexual order without making their gayness the very basis of their claims" (19).

Arthur Brittan and Mary Maynard's view on identity revision is somewhat different. They argue that oppression cannot be explained "by reducing it to some deep underlying cause" (1); rather, oppression is constituted by *all* "critical dimensions of personal and social experience" (2), such as race, gender, and class. Because socialization of any one aspect is, thus, partial, revision is possible (Brittan and Maynard 87). Such revision would be though, it seems to me, equally partial; this, however, is not necessarily be a bad thing. Kenneth Karst makes a similar point, saying that identities co-exist in an individual and change in interaction (332).

In any case, Brittan and Maynard's further point is that revision of, for example, gender, depends on access to resources--which, it seems to me, depends on class--which can, it seems to me, depend on race and gender.

Central to the struggle to define, and re-define, is the issue of language. Three separate points can be made here. One, language is the means by which our identity is constituted; as Rosalind Coward and John Ellis say it, language is "the place in which the social individual is constructed" (1); Charles Taylor also makes language central to identity--we develop, initially and continuously, through the acquisition of language; and Martha Minow points out that language "embeds unstated points of comparison inside categories" (4). Feminist scholars have already explored the role of language in conceptualization, specifically the inadequacy of a male-based language to express female experience; the question here is, simply, 'how can we identify what we don't have a word for?'; as Jean Baker Miller says, "the very ways we find to conceptualize experience are in large measure given to us by the culture in which we learn 'how to think and feel'. . ." (112): if you are a subordinate in a culture created/maintained by the dominants, the resources to adequately define your identity may simply not be available.

And that is the second point: insofar as "what we call ourselves has implications for political practice" (S.Epstein 11), access to linguistic (and educational) resources is important. Unfortunately, this access is linked to class (Brittan and Maynard; Karst 26).

The third point to be made about language and the struggle to define is that language is often *how* we belong (Karst); in fact, language is often an identity marker (the objectivist view, Ross 5)--Canada's anglophone/ francophone identity conflict is one such example.

Also central to the struggle to define is power. Dominants identify to stigmatize and purify: the dominant group creates "a special stigmatized category of individuals. . . so as to keep the rest of society pure" (McIntosh in S.Epstein 16); this resonates with Nancy Chodorow's comment that "a rigid assertion of differentness reflects a defensive need to separate." Subordinates, on the other hand, identify to legitimize. This explains the changing valence of identity labels: 'pagan' was once negative, when it was used by dominants to stigmatize, but now it is becoming positive, as it is used by pagans themselves to legitimize

their atheism. And, of course, some labels are positive and negative simultaneously, depending on who uses them, a 'dominant' or a 'subordinate': consider 'nigger' and 'girl.'

Coming back specifically to the issue of 'who' does the defining, a prevalent opinion seems to be that "those who identify with a group can redefine the meaning and norms of group identity" (Young 46). However, as the 'feminist group' shows, this is easier said than done. Also, one, this opinion presumes that identity is self-constituted--it ignores, perhaps, the power of the other; and two, it presumes that one is always aware of one's identity--insofar as identity is other-constituted, and especially when oppression is present, this may not be the case. (Debates about the constitution of identity will be addressed later.)

At the heart of the third struggle, the struggle over satisfaction of identity, is the politics of difference. Taylor and Minow, especially, discuss when recognizing differences leads to equality (presumably, satisfaction) and when not recognizing differences lead to equality.

Taylor explains that in the public sphere, the politics of equal recognition can mean two different things: on the one hand, indifference is emphasized because everyone has an equal right to citizenship; on the other hand, difference is emphasized because each individual/group has a right to their unique distinctness. So to be nondiscriminatory, we must discriminate; to be impartial, we must be partial.

Minow also identifies 'the dilemma of difference'--"the stigma of difference may be recreated both by ignoring and by focusing on it" (20). This reminds me of Audre Lorde's 'lines to a white woman': 'The first thing you must do is forget that I'm black; the second thing you must do is never forget that I'm black.'" I think one of the biggest struggles to 'satisfy identity' is the struggle to solve this dilemma of difference. It is, as Minow points out, the choice between integration and separation. Affirmative action/reverse discrimination is an illustration of this conflict. It is thought, says Karst, that affirmative action, a manifestation of a theory of group rights which he refers to as "a form of ethnic corporatism" (341), will result in accentuating racial and ethnic divisions, and eventually lead to separatism. However, Karst argues that given what is known about assimilation and cultural pluralism, the result will not be separatism but integration. For if separatism is caused by the subordination of minorities through exclusion from jobs and compounded by a lack of resources, then affirmative action, that is, increasing employment and thus access to resources, will decrease subordination and therefore *discourage* separation.

His next point is equally important, establishing the necessity of seeing such programs as an *intermediate* step: "If affirmative action programs were to settle in institutional concrete--for example, by establishing racial quotas in permanent legislation--there might be some reason to worry about a drift into cultural corporatism" (Karst 344).

However, it seems to me that even though "the chief results of affirmative action are not corporatist, but individualistic, freeing individuals from being locked into subordinate status because of their group membership", such freedom, when scarcity of the good in question is given, may be at the expense of other individuals.

A way out of the dilemma, suggests Minow, is to remove the stigma from difference. 'Positive identity-ing', I think, seeks to do just that. It also, by implication, 'states the norm'--that the norm need *not* be stated is one of the five assumptions Minow uncovers in her search for adequate ways out of the dilemma.

Insofar as a claim of identity is a plea to belong, there are two paths, says Karst, that cultural outsiders have followed to satisfy the need to belong: "turning inward to group solidarity and cultural politics and turning outward toward assimilation into the larger society" (306). However, "[both] lead most people to the same destination" (325), that of integration and connection.

Having considered, by transposing Fraser's 'needs politics' theory, the struggles that comprise identity politics and thus offered a definition of identity politics, I will next take on a more pragmatic perspective.

Remarking on the juxtaposition of a discourse about needs with discourses about rights and interests, Fraser formulates several important questions (292), three of which are, simplified and transposed to identity, (1) Why has identity-talk become so prominent? (2) What are the major varieties of identity-talk? and (3) What opportunities and/or obstacles does the identity idiom pose for movements interested in social transformation?

With respect to the first question, where satisfaction of identity is expressed in socioeconomic terms, certainly socioeconomic contexts have pushed identity-talk to foregrounds. However specific phenomena

may also catalyze identity-talk. For example, I think that AIDS (however mistakenly) has boosted sexual-orientation identity-talk. And perhaps global changes in politics (in particular, those involving war) that affect emigration patterns affect the prominence of culture identity-talk.

But Steinberg presents another view: ". . . [I]t is precisely because the real and objective basis for ethnic culture is rapidly disappearing that identity has been elevated to a 'symbolic' plane and a premium is placed on the subjective dimensions of ethnicity. People desperately wish to 'feel' ethnic precisely because they have all but lost the prerequisites for 'being' ethnic" (S.Epstein 39). This may apply to other identity claims as well.

Insofar as identity depends on self-determination and self-development, domination, as 'the institutional constraint' on the former (Young 37), and oppression, as 'the institutional constraint' on the latter (Young 37), together 'inhibit' identity; a social climate characterized by domination and oppression would therefore spawn much identity-talk.

Further, Young describes five faces of oppression, two of which are marginalization and cultural imperialism (Young 55,60). Insofar as identity claims counter lack of recognition and invisibility, they reduce marginalization and cultural imperialism. So, such claims become prominent when marginalization and cultural imperialism are rampant.

Also, as feminists surely know, 'the more coherent a group, the greater its cultural influence upon the larger society' (S.Epstein 41)--identity claims cohere a group, cementing inclusion.

But a label says '*you don't* belong' as much as it says '*we do* belong'; because of this exclusionary power, identity-talk may also become prominent in tandem with any kind of reactionary politics.

With respect to the second question, the three major varieties of *needs*-talk identified by Fraser can also describe *identity*-talk. By far, the most prevalent kind is 'oppositional discourse' which involves "the crystallization of new social identities on the part of subordinated persons and groups" (Fraser 303).

Reacting to that is 'reprivatization discourse' which "den[ies] the claims of oppositional movements for . . . legitimate political status" (Fraser 304) and state provision of satisfaction. Such discourse seeks to privatize the oppositional discourse, to keep it out of the public politic.

The third major variety identified by Fraser is 'expert discourse' which involves "social problem-solving, institution-building, and professional class formation" (Fraser 303). This discourse is the way an identity claim can get translated, legitimated, into claims for public/political attention. Unfortunately, these discourses are restricted to specialized publics, often inaccessible to those discoursing at the 'oppositional' level.

The identity experience of midwives perhaps illustrates all three varieties: the initial emergence of the identity-claim was in opposition to hospital-based doctors; reprivatization discourse seeks to keep midwifery a personal concern and thus ineligible for state funding; and expert discourse is now trying to certify the profession.

Identity-talk can perhaps also be divided into kinds according to their purposes: expressive identity-talk seeks to preserve culture, an example of which would be 'Afro-American'; instrumental identity-talk seeks to increase rights and rewards, an example of which would be 'hibakusha'.

As a movement interested in social transformation, feminism must be particularly interested in the third question, 'what opportunities and/or obstacles does the identity idiom pose?' Insofar as identity is a claim of difference, Minow provides a very good analysis of both the opportunities and the obstacles so posed, with her discussion of the 'dilemma of difference'.

However, insofar as identity-talk seeks to name, I think the biggest opportunity is expressed by S.Epstein: "power inheres in the ability to name" (S.Epstein 10-11).

Ironically, I think the biggest obstacle also lies with this naming, this struggle to define. The obstacle is not with *who*, however, but with *how*: that is, 'how is identity constituted?' The following are axes of current debate: essentialist--constructionist, psychological--sociological, subjectivist--objectivist, ego--role, individual--group, self--society, primordialist--optionalist.

Not surprisingly, there are problems with each position. For example, if one takes the essentialist position, that there is some essential attribute in the individual that is the basis for the identity in question, one must say that a man cannot be a feminist: though he may share the feminist ideology, perhaps even more than

many women may, he lacks the proper chromosomal combination.

Another problem with the essentialist view is that it 'coerces' membership and is thus unattractive (though a constructionist view, that one's identity is constituted by one's society, can be equally coercive). One could reconcile an essentialist view with voluntariness by arguing that one can have the essential attribute but choose not to 'cash in on it' so to speak. But this results in the problem described earlier, with the example of appearing racist when one disregards one's own race; also, this solution does nothing for one who lacks the essential attribute but seeks the identity.

If one takes the subjectivist position, that one's identity depends solely on how one feels and there is no 'essential' requirement or behavioral standard, then a man could claim to be a lesbian.

And, to continue with examples of problems, to take the constituted-by-society position seems to deny individual freedom and choice, but to take the ego/individual/self position denies the influence of context.

Dichotomies are, however, usually inaccurate. Consider S. Epstein's comments about primordialists, who treat ethnicity as an inescapable given, and optionalists, who treat it as something that can be "shed, resurrected, or adopted as the situation warrants" (S.Epstein 35): experience, he says, is usually somewhere between the poles, as one can't shed or adopt ethnicities at will; but then again, ethnic categories are historical products subject to redefinition from time to time. Dichotomies also give rise to problematic hierarchies. Perhaps we are better to consider instead continua between the poles, with intersecting, rather than parallel, axes. One result might be an interactive model (Erickson): to be constituted 'relationally to x' (S.Epstein) is different than to be constituted 'by x'; this leaves room for individual choice and could result in a 'socialized sense of individuality' (S.Epstein). And then, too, we can consider multiple identities (Young 48; S.Epstein 30).

What makes the constitution of identity so important is that constitution determines consequences. A purely self-defined view of identity would have profound consequences for questions of collective rights and responsibilities: 'I say I'm native therefore I'm allowed to hunt during the off-season.' This argues for *some* standard of attribute (an essentialist view) or at least some behavioral standard (an objectivist view). There are difficulties, nevertheless, with both modifications: for example, how much genetic heritage is enough to qualify one as native, and isn't behaviour which is separate from ideology hypocrisy? As A.L.Epstein suggests, some ethnic groups may be, after all, "interest groups exploiting parts of their traditional culture in order to articulate informal organizational functions that serve in the struggle of these groups for power within the political structure" (A.L.Epstein x)

"People who base their claims to social rights on the basis of a group identity will not appreciate being told that that identity is just a social construct" (S.Epstein 22). I might add, however, to look at the essentialist view instead of the constructionist view, that they would not appreciate being told that their identity was just an accident of birth either. What seems needed, of course, is an element of individual choice, but as I've just shown, this is not easily incorporated. The debate regarding the effect of marriage on native women is one example of many underlining the necessity of determining the criterion of identity and its legitimate consequences.

Does this transposition of Fraser's needs politics to identity politics suggest that identity *is* a need? Perhaps, but not necessarily. Recall that Fraser focused not on needs themselves, but on the discourses about needs. At best, therefore, I am suggesting that identity politics is characterized by the same discourses as needs politics.

Rather, the transposition is meant merely to serve as a tool of analysis: hopefully, (a) by focusing attention on the struggles to legitimate, define, and satisfy an identity claim, and (b) by attempting to answer the questions of why, what and why not, I have, by using a theory of needs politics, broadened our understanding of identity politics.

[1] See Annette Baier, Claudia Card, Steven Epstein, Erik Erickson, Charles Taylor, Iris Young, and others.

[2] Martha Minow, identifying the assumption that the norm need not be stated, explores this aspect as well.

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