Feminist Thought (F14)
November 12, 2014

Identity Politics

1. What? Why?[1]

       Alcoff characterizes the CRC's "Black Feminist Statement" as the locus classicus of identity politics:

> …identity politics emerges as a belief in the relevance to identity to politics, such that, for example, one might justifiably assume that those who share one's identity will be one's most consistent allies. Such a claim does not assume that identities are always perfectly homogeneous or that identity groups are unproblematic..but they did assume that identities *mattered*, and that they were in some sense *real.* (Alcoff, "Who's Afraid of Identity Politics?" 314)

Question: In what sense are racial identities, for example, *real?* Is it problematic to organize around an imposed (and hierarchical?) social category.

2. How do identities matter?

- Politically – one's best allies are one's identity group; those who don't share one's identity won't care as much about the liberation of those sharing an identity.

> This focusing on our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. (CRC, 414)

> I do not know of any other politics of social change that works other than the one that asks people to explore deeply their own location on the axes of power. Know where you stand, what your privileges are, and who is standing on your toes. (Matsuda 421)

- Epistemically – those in a subordinated group have privileged access to the harms of that form of subordination. (Standpoint epistemology, situated knowers.)

> …who I am colors how I see the world, how I understand questions of law and justice. By claiming, exploring, questioning my own identity in an explicit way, I seek truth. And I seek to encourage my students to do the same. (Matsuda 419)

> …I can take on the cloak of the detached universal, but it is an uncomfortable garment. It is not me, and I do not do my best work wearing it. I seek self-liberation when I speak from my particular stance. The most brilliant and moving work coming from our community represents the liberated voice. (Matsuda 419)

- Theoretically – understanding social justice from a dominant position, using the terms and frameworks of dominant groups, does not dig deep enough into the issues.

> It is this tendency toward the monolithic, monotheistic, and so on, that worries me about the race for theory. Constructs like the *center* and *periphery* reveal that tendency to want to make the world less complex by organizing it according to one principle, to fix it through an idea which is really an ideal. Many of us are particularly sensitive to monolithism because one major element of ideologies of dominance, such as sexism and racism, is to dehumanize people by stereotyping them, by denying their variousness and complexity. Inevitably, monolithism becomes a metasystem, in which there is a controlling ideal, especially in relation to pleasure. (Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *TF* 409)

3. Implications?

> There resides, in our particularities, a new and profound universality. (Matsuda 421)

> Let's try it our way, the mestizo way, the Chicana way, the woman way. (Anzaldúa 428)

What is the goal of identity politics? What is its ideal? Where do we go from here?

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[1] See also: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-politics/

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Combahee River Collective Statement. "A Black Feminist Statement." In *Theorizing Feminisms: A Reader*. Edited by Elizabeth Hackett and Sally Haslanger. Oxford University Press, 2005. © Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/.

Christian, Barbara. "The Race for Theory." In *Theorizing Feminisms: A Reader*. Edited by Elizabeth Hackett and Sally Haslanger. Oxford University Press, 2005. © Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/.

Matsuda, Mari. "On Identity Politics." In *Theorizing Feminisms: A Reader*. Edited by Elizabeth Hackett and Sally Haslanger. Oxford University Press, 2005. © Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/.

Anzaldua, Gloria. "La Conciencia de la Mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness." In *Theorizing Feminisms: A Reader*. Edited by Elizabeth Hackett and Sally Haslanger. Oxford University Press, 2005. © Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/.

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