Beyond identity

Feminism, identity and identity politics

Feminist Theory
Copyright ©2000
SAGE Publications
(London,
Thousand Oaks, CA
and New Delhi)
vol. 1(3): 289-308.
[1464-7001
(200012)1:3;
289-308; 015099]

Susan Hekman *University of Texas at Arlington*

Abstract This article is a critique, first, of the theory of identity advanced by Judith Butler and many of the feminist critics of identity politics, and, second, of identity politics itself. I argue that Butler's rejection of the modernist subject for its opposite, the fictional, substanceless subject, is untenable. Looking to object relations theory, I argue instead for a concept of the subject as an ungrounded ground, occupying a middle ground between the postmodern and the modern subject. With regard to identity politics I argue that instead of populating the political realm with multiple identities, we should instead remove identity entirely from the political realm.

keywords *gender, subject*

Introduction

Why has the issue of identity become so problematic in feminist theory and practice? Why has identity politics been so widely criticized, even vilified by feminists of many different persuasions? Why do the issues raised by identity and identity politics seem to be so intractable, failing to yield to any of the many solutions that have been proposed to resolve them? Despite more than a decade of discussion, the problems raised by identity and identity politics have, far from disappearing, become something of an obsession among feminists.[1]

Why this is the case is not immediately apparent. Both the approach to identity dominant in contemporary feminism and the presuppositions of identity politics seem, on the face of it, to be uniquely appropriate to the problems facing contemporary feminism. Particularly in the USA, the theory of identity that has been at the center of feminist debates in the past decade is a version of that articulated most dramatically by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and subsequent works. Although Butler's approach is often criticized, it has had a profound effect on feminist discussions of identity, defining the terms of many of those discussions. At the center of Butler's work is the replacement of the notion of a fixed, essential identity with that of an identity constituted by fluctuating and fluid discursive

forces. Butler's theory replaces the essential subject of modernist discourse and psychoanalytic theory with 'inessential woman', a being constructed by the discourses constituting her world. The identity that Butler proposes seems to sweep away all the problems created by the modernist identity of 'woman', problems that had plagued both first-wave and second-wave feminist theory. In its place Butler offers a socially constituted 'woman' who resists this identity by revealing it to be a fiction.

Identity politics, similarly, seems to be the necessary antidote to the problems that have faced women in the political realm. First-wave feminism, emphasizing the equality of men and women, addressed the problem of women's political identity by attempting to fit women into the universal category of 'citizen'. Second-wave feminism's discovery that this category was inherently rather than incidentally masculine effectively canceled that strategy. But the solution offered by second-wave feminism, emphasizing the differences between men and women and defining feminist politics in terms of the universal category 'woman', turned out to be equally flawed. The category of 'woman' enshrined the hegemony of the white, middle-class, heterosexual woman, relegating other women to the margins of feminist politics.

From this perspective the advent of identity politics seemed to be the perfect solution for feminist politics. Identity politics offers a plethora of identities from which women can choose. Instead of being limited to one general and necessarily hierarchical category of 'woman', women can choose an identity that fits them, one that resonates with their particular situation. Identity politics has overcome the homogenizing tendencies of second-wave feminism by acknowledging the differences among women and, most significantly, attacking the hierarchy concealed in the concept 'woman'.

The promise implicit in the new feminist theory of identity and feminist identity politics, however, has not materialized. Many feminists have argued that Butler's theory of identity goes too far in destabilizing identity. But exactly what is wrong with Butler's theory and what we might replace it with remains unclear. Identity politics as a strategy for the political empowerment of women has also been widely criticized. Despite these criticisms, however, many feminists are reluctant to abandon this strategy entirely, because it seems to be a necessary vehicle for the diverse array of women in the political realm.[2]

It is my contention that this stalemate is the result of two fundamental problems. First, the theory of identity advanced by Butler that forms the basis of many feminist critiques of identity politics rests on an underlying misunderstanding: that there is no middle ground between the metaphysical modernist subject on one hand and the total deconstruction of identity on the other. In her zeal to deconstruct the modernist subject, Butler embraces its polar opposite: the subject as fiction, fantasy, play. I argue that this is a false antithesis and that a middle ground on identity is both possible and necessary. My thesis is that identity can and must be defined as having a stable ground, what I call an ungrounded ground, but that this definition need not assume the metaphysical baggage of the modernist

subject. The second problem in the debate over identity and identity politics is also related to the modernist subject. The modernist subject that Butler rejects is rational, autonomous and, most importantly, disembodied. In the political realm this subject translates into the 'universal citizen' who has no race, class, gender or culture. In reality, however, this universal citizen has a very distinct identity – the white, male, property owner of the Lockean tradition – and this particular identity is a prerequisite for political participation. It is this identity that has created the problem that identity politics seeks to address. My thesis is that the antidote to this politics is not a proliferation of multiple identities in politics but, rather, removing identity entirely from the sphere of politics.

Unless we understand the roots of the problems that have created the present feminist stalemate on identity and identity politics, we will be unable to move beyond those problems. My aim in the following critique of Butler's theory of identity and the critiques of identity politics is both to reveal those roots and to suggest alternatives. My argument for, first, a middle ground on the concept of identity and, second, a politics beyond identity is informed by the conviction that feminists must transcend rather than replicate the errors of identity.

Doers and deeds: Butler's theory of identity

To say that Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* changed the theoretical landscape of feminist theories of identity and identity politics is an understatement; it is more accurate to say that, since *Gender Trouble*, any feminist analysis of identity has to take Butler's theory into account. It is obvious, furthermore, that profoundly altering feminist theories of identity and the feminist practice of identity politics was precisely Butler's intention. The first pages of *Gender Trouble* make it clear that the objects of Butler's critique are the identity of 'woman' and the kind of politics informed by this identity. Specifically, her intention is to reveal the liability of the first, and, consequently, the futility of the second. In my critique of Butler, my intention is to show that the concept of gender identity that she proposes as an alternative to 'woman' is just as flawed as the original concept and, consequently, that the concept of resistance that she advocates as a counter to identity politics is similarly flawed.

The object of Butler's critique of identity is the modernist subject, a subject defined as constituted by an abiding substance, a core identity. Her central thesis is that the keys to this abiding substance are the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender and sexuality. Against this conception of the identity of the subject Butler offers an array of arguments. First, she asserts that the modernist subject rests on an ontological mistake. There is, she asserts, no 'abiding substance' called 'man' or 'woman' but, rather, these identities are produced through the compulsory ordering of attributes into coherent gender sequences (1990: 24). The ontological assumption of the modernist subject, thus, is false: there is no 'there' there: 'There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender' (1990: 25); the gendered body 'has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality' (1990: 136).

Butler's second argument is that this ontological fiction, the identity 'woman', conceals the acts through which it is constituted. Assuming that 'woman' is a stable entity, in other words, blinds us to the constitution of that entity; instead we see it as 'natural'. Against this, Butler argues that her goal is to produce a 'genealogy of gender' that reveals the contingent acts that constitute the appearance of natural necessity (1990: 35). If the 'abiding substance' 'man' or 'woman' is produced through the compulsory ordering of attributes into coherent gender sequences, then Butler wants to reveal the source of the compulsion behind this process.

In order to establish these two arguments, Butler elaborates her alternative theory of gender: performativity. If there is no substance behind gender identity, then 'that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (1990: 25). Gender identity is 'tenuously constituted in time, instituted through an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*' (1990: 140; emphasis in original). This thesis, originally advanced in *Gender Trouble*, is clarified in Butler's subsequent book, *Bodies that Matter* (1993). Here Butler argues that in *Gender Trouble* she did not define sex as a 'performance' in the sense that a pre-existing subject performs a role. Rather, she asserts that her intention was to define sex as performativity in the sense that it entails the forced reiteration of norms that constitute the subject. It is not free play but is, rather, constrained by the hegemony of specific gender norms (1993: 94–5).

It should be clear from these arguments why Butler rejects identity politics. Not only does the politics of 'woman' rest on an ontological confusion, but it is actually detrimental to the cause of feminism because it conceals the mechanisms that constitute women's subordination. At the beginning of *Gender Trouble* Butler states that, 'Feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of "woman," the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought' (1990: 2). Identity politics conceals the political, discursive origins of the fabricated core of gender identity. By deconstructing identity politics, however, we can establish as political the very terms through which identity is articulated (1990: 148).

If identity politics is detrimental to the cause of feminism, then what form of resistance is appropriate for feminists? Or, in the terms of her book's title, how do we create gender trouble? On the face of it, Butler's answer to this question is straightforward: gender trouble is created by not 'doing' gender as it is supposed to be done. The first formulation of this strategy is Butler's statement that if gender is established in multiple ways, then it can be disrupted in multiple ways as well. Such disruptions, she hopes, will reveal the contingency of gendered identity and hence its vulnerability (1990: 32–4). This vague formulation is defined at the end of *Gender Trouble* in the strategy of pastiche. Butler carefully distinguishes pastiche, the mocking of the notion of an original, from parody, the mocking of an original (1990: 138). Pastiche, she concludes, will create gender trouble that will undermine the constructions of gender (1990: 147).

In what might be an implicit recognition of the inadequacy of these vague formulations, Butler returns to the issue of resistance in *Bodies that Matter*.

Here she introduces a refinement of her theory that places significant restrictions on the possibilities of resistance. Resistance, she argues, cannot enter into the dynamic by which the symbolic reiterates its power if it is to be successful in displacing that power. What this means is that the radical refusal of the law of sex, and, particularly, embracing its opposite, will serve to reinforce rather than displace that law (1993: 106–13).

Butler acknowledges that the strategy she rejects – the absolute opposition of the law of sex – is an attractive one. The demand to radically overcome the constitutive constraint of the law, she notes, is its own form of violence. But she nevertheless insists that this strategy is doomed. She argues, for example, that a lesbian who opposes heterosexuality absolutely may be more in its power than a straight woman (1993: 116–17). Butler's alternative is what she calls 'positions of resistance', specifically 'queer politics'. Certain disavowals are fundamentally enabling; others are not. We can conclude from this that queer politics is one of these; 'straight' lesbian politics is not. But we are never given specific guidelines by which we can distinguish one from the other. It is significant that at the very end of the book Butler herself raises this question by asking: 'How will we know the difference between the power we promote and the power we oppose?' (1993: 241). Instead of answering this question, she instead asks another: 'Is it, one might rejoin, a matter of "knowing?"' Our error, she implies, is to assume that this distinction is something that can be fully and finally known.

The two conclusions I want to draw from this analysis of Butler's work are closely related. First, Butler's theory of gender identity as perfomativity is inadequate for a reason that she herself explicitly condemns: it adopts the polar opposite of the position she rejects and, thus, is constituted and constrained by that concept. As Butler herself repeatedly tells us, opposites inhabit each other. She rejects the opposite of the law of sex as a possible site of resistance. Yet the theory of gender as performativity that she embraces is itself an opposite. Butler rejects the ontology of the modernist subject, an ontology of the abiding substance of sex. But she then embraces the opposite of this concept, a substanceless gender identity. By her own theory, this is a flawed strategy.

There are indications that, on some level, Butler realizes the liability of her position. In the book that follows *Bodies that Matter*, *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), Butler turns away from the relatively practical problems of identity and identity politics to the realm of abstract theory. She continues to argue that we must reject any internal core of subjectivity. But she also concedes, although only in passing, that some version of such a core is necessary to psychic health. She argues that if children are to 'persist in a psychic and social sense there must be dependency and the foundation of attachment: there is no possibility of not loving, where love is bound up with the requirements for life' (1997: 8). Further, in a discussion of the possibility of an ethical subject, Butler remarks that:

> . . . we might reread 'being' as precisely the potentiality that remains unexhausted by any particular interpellation. Such a failure of interpellation may well undermine the capacity of the subject to 'be' in a self-identical sense, but it may also

> mark the path toward a more open, even more ethical kind of being, one of or for the future. (1997: 131)

All of Butler's basic themes are here: the definition of resistance as the failure of subjectification; the denial of a 'self-identical' subject. But there is also a new element: a 'being' that escapes subjectification. What this 'being' could consist in is a puzzle. It sounds curiously like an essential being, but obviously cannot be because Butler has vehemently denied the existence of such an entity. I would like to suggest that Butler, in her obsessive desire to reject any possibility of an essential subject, is forced by the logic of her argument to fall back on precisely such a subject. In other words, Butler's advocacy of the polar opposite of the essential subject leads her back to some version of that subject.[3]

My second conclusion is that Butler's untenable concept of gender identity entails an untenable concept of resistance. What, precisely, are we to make of a theory of resistance defined as pastiche? How does this translate into concrete political actions? How can we discriminate among actions that destabilize gender and those that conform to the law of sex? She tells us that this distinction cannot be fully and finally known. But we must know it at least provisionally to engage in political action.

In the following I will argue that there is another alternative to gender identity than the two options Butler considers: an ontologically grounded substance and no substance at all. Defining gender identity as an ungrounded ground, a socially constructed core, provides a more fruitful approach to gender issues. It also provides the basis for a different kind of argument against identity politics and a more viable political alternative.

Identity politics: the critique

The theory of identity that Butler has advanced either explicitly or implicitly informs most of the critiques of identity politics that dominated feminist discussions in the 1990s. Admonitions against reifying identity or assuming the existence of an essential identity are everywhere in the feminist literature. At this point in the debate it would be difficult to find a feminist who would explicitly defend an essential identity for 'woman', 'lesbian', 'Chicana', 'woman of color' or any of the other identities that have been advanced in the name of identity politics. Despite this consensus, however, doubts remain. Identity politics, particularly the kind of oppositional identity politics that Butler specifically condemns, exerts a powerful force for marginalized groups. Thus, on some level, the critiques remain unconvincing. My argument is that this is the case not because identity politics is the solution to the dilemma of feminist politics, but because the concept of identity that informs the critiques is problematic.

The most pervasive theme of the critics of identity politics is the claim that it inevitably involves the fixing of identity and, thus, incurs all the dangers entailed by the modernist essentialist subject. This criticism has an ironic aspect. Identity politics graphically illustrates how identities change and are reconstructed under different social conditions. Early proponents of

identity politics, indeed, saw it as having the effect of problematizing the connection between identity and politics (Alcoff, 1988: 432–3). And yet, in the real world of identity politics, the constructedness of identities is denied. Once a political movement fixes on an identity, it becomes the foundation of the new political truth that the movement espouses. The identities of identity politics are not tailored to individual differences. Nor do they recognize identities as fluid and constructed. Rather, they fix identity in a new location.

The most comprehensive attempt to both define and combat this fixing tendency is William Connolly's *Identity/Difference* (1991). Connolly's principal concern is to contest the tendency to establish identity by defining its opposite (other) as evil. His work has become the centerpiece of many feminist critiques of identity. It is thus significant that embedded in Connolly's critique is an ambivalence about identity that parallels that of Butler. Central to Connolly's argument is his claim that: 'Identity requires difference in order to be, and it conveys difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty' (1991: 64). This connection between difference and otherness leads Connolly to an apparently contradictory conclusion: we can neither defend nor dispense with identities. On one hand, he states,

> My identity is what I am and how I am recognized rather than what I choose, want or consent to. It is the dense self from which choosing, wanting and consenting proceed. Without that density, these acts could not occur; with it, they are recognized to be mine. (1991: 64)

This is the definition of identity that Connolly cannot dispense with. But it is also one that he cannot defend because, on his account, both personal and collective identities inevitably define themselves as true, converting differences into otherness and otherness into scapegoats (1991: 67).

But Connolly, like Butler, quickly passes over this ambiguity in the definition of identity that he ultimately espouses. He places more weight on the danger of fixing identities than on the necessity of what he calls the 'dense self'. It is this Butler/Connolly definition of identity as dangerous that has become the orthodoxy in feminist critiques. It is this definition that informs the condemnation of identity politics and the advocacy of a politics that, in Connolly's words, problematizes the tactics by which established identities protect themselves through the conversion of difference into otherness (1991: 159).

Inspired by the Butler/Connolly orthodoxy, many feminist theorists have explored the problems entailed by the fixing of identity in feminist identity politics. The first of these problems involves the question of diversity or multiplicity. Shane Phelan's analysis of this problem from the perspective of lesbian politics is particularly instructive. Phelan argues: 'What has been accepted in the lesbian community is not the lesbian but the *Lesbian* – the politically/sexually/culturally correct being, the carrier of *the* lesbian feminist consciousness' (1989: 57; emphases in original). Phelan argues that this definition arose from the need to impose unity in the lesbian community. But in the process of constructing this identity, any sense of the

plurality of lesbian lives was lost. Phelan's analysis reveals another dimension of Connolly's argument that fixing identities creates otherness and scapegoating. Phelan's point is that identities, even oppositional identities, can be just as restrictive as the collective identity imposed by the liberal polity, erasing multiplicity and individuality just as the liberal concept of 'citizen' does.

Another aspect of the problem of multiplicity has emerged in third-wave feminist writing. Reading the accounts of third-wavers one is struck by the diversity of identities that are proclaimed (Findlen, 1995; Walker, 1995). The celebration of diversity in these accounts, however, does little to resolve the difficult questions raised by this diversity. The author of one of these accounts, Sonja Curry-Johnson, confesses to an 'acute sense of multiplicity' (1995: 222). The multiple identities that she feels define her also divide her. 'Each identity defines me; each is responsible for elements of my character; from each I devise some sustenance for my soul.' But these identities do not peacefully co-exist. The effort to blend them together harmoniously she describes as 'desperate'. Curry-Johnson's article is, in some sense, a cry for help. She feels that women should be able to 'bring our full selves to the table'. But she also does not see how this could be made possible.

A second problem with the fixing of identity occurs in the external political arena. As the participants in identity politics police a certain identity internally (Phelan's 'Lesbian'), this identity also becomes fixed externally in the political arena in which these identities position themselves. This fixing is the result of the complex relationship between difference, identity and power. As June Jordan so aptly puts it, 'There is difference and there is power. And who holds the power decides the meaning of the difference' (1994: 197). The differences that identity politics embraces are the differences that society creates and enforces. Feminist identity politics began as a rebellion against the identity assigned to 'woman' by patriarchal institutions. It has evolved into a rebellion against the general category 'woman' that privileges white, middle-class women. Yet the identities that women have embraced under the rubric of identity politics are not of their own choosing; they are, rather, precisely those imposed by the society they are challenging. Feminism, as an oppositional politics, should be challenging rather than affirming the identities and differences of our polity. The effect of identity politics, however, is to reify rather than redefine those differences.[4]

In *States of Injury* (1995) Wendy Brown explores this problem and its implications for the politics of identity. Although she applauds identity politics as a deconstruction of collective identity, she argues that the solution offered by identity politics is counter-productive. Those who engage in identity politics to right historical political injustices are forced by the logic of that politics to embrace an identity that, if the politics is successful, is fixed in legal codes. Brown argues that there are serious dangers involved in tying individuals to these legal definitions. Identity politics rooted in these definitions fixes the identity of the political actors as injured, as victims. These identities originated in an effort to subordinate

these subjects, not free them. From Brown's perspective, identity politics involves embracing and fixing identity in that of the injured victim, an identity imposed and enforced by hegemonic political power. Such identities, she claims, cannot be liberatory.[5]

Another aspect of this problem is illustrated by the experience of pan-ethnic political movements in the USA. Ethnic groups are, in theory, voluntary collectives defined by national origin, whose members share a distinctive, integrated culture. In practice, however, ethnic politics in the USA is something quite different. Political necessity has thrown together ethnic groups who, at best, have little in common and, at worst, have a history of ethnic hatred. Groups categorized as, for example, 'Asian' or 'Hispanic' are made up of diverse peoples; their designation is a result of the dominant group's inability or unwillingness to recognize their differences. The 'ethnic' movement that results is thus a product of the necessities of liberal politics and the legal categories created by that politics. It unites individuals with little or no 'natural' ethnic similarities and forces them to ignore their differences for political and legal purposes. Such a politics emphasizes the constructed, political character of ethnic categories and the constitutive role of dominant institutions.[6]

What this comes to is that, despite the best efforts of the critics of identity politics, the practice has resulted in a fixing of identity both internally and externally. Internally, the members of an identity collective police identity by creating an ideal to which they expect the participants to conform. This results in the fixing of a particular manifestation of that identity – for example, Phelan's 'Lesbian'. Externally, it means that, as participants in democratic politics, the identity of the members of an identity collective is fixed by the dominant political group. This can be done formally by legal categories – the definition of a protected class or the creation of a category on census forms. Or it can be done informally in the sense of a recognized voting bloc: the gay vote, the lesbian vote, the women's vote, and so on. In either case the result is the same. The identity that has been constructed as a site of resistance is reified and fixed, stripped of ambiguity, fluidity and individuality. It becomes a vehicle by which state power is extended rather than limited.

The theory and practice of identity politics thus exhibits a curious phenomenon. On one hand, the feminist theorists influenced by post-structuralism and postmodernism advocate a fluid, constructed identity, eschewing the fixing of identity as a modernist fiction that is both false and dangerous. On the other hand, the practitioners of identity politics, in the process of constructing a new, more palatable identity, inadvertently fix that identity; they police their members internally by enforcing a certain identity and police them externally by presenting a united, falsely homogeneous front in the political world that allows a policing of subjects by the state. Ambiguous, fluid identities don't fly in the political world or in courts of law. Thus, far from problematizing the connection between identity and politics as the theorists had hoped, identity politics has instead made embracing a specific, fixed identity a precondition for political action.

It is easy to dismiss this problem as academic, as a result of the increasing isolation of feminist theorists from the real world of feminist politics. But the split between theory and practice that characterizes identity politics has its roots in the inadequacy of the theory of identity that informs these critiques. Since the articulation of Butler's theory of identity in *Gender Trouble*, many feminists have been uneasy about defining gender identity as a fiction, a fluid construction, performativity. Many have advocated a more stable concept of gender than that defined by Butler, but exactly how this could be accomplished without returning to an essentialist subject is not clear. The quasi-essentialist subjects of identity politics are a symptom of this unease. One is tempted to conclude that feminism has reached an impasse in which we must declare with Connolly that we can neither defend nor dispense with identities.

Identity: the ungrounded ground

My goal in the following is to try to find a way out of this impasse by defining a subject that avoids the polarities of the modernist, essentialist subject on one hand, and the fictional subject on the other. My strategy is to argue for the possibility of a middle ground on the constitution of the subject, a doer who is neither essential nor the embodiment of a universal substance, but nevertheless possesses a stable concept of self. My argument is that what is missing in the debate over identity is a concept of a self that is an ungrounded ground.[7]

Butler and the other theorists who define identity as a fiction end up denying a necessary component of selfhood: a stable sense of self that provides the basis from which choices are made. I argued above that both Butler and Connolly allude to the necessity of such a subject. But both theorists are so caught up in the dangers of fixing identities that they ignore the dangers of denying this self. Against both I would like to argue that the dangers of ignoring this dense self, the necessary error of identity, are just as great as the danger of fixing identities.

The literature on identity and identity politics has little to say about this danger. One of the few exceptions to this, James Glass's *Shattered Selves* (1993), is rarely cited in the debates that swirl around identity. Glass argues that the postmodern conception of self and identity is dangerous in the sense that it describes the fragmented, shattered selves of multiple personality disorders. His argument is directed specifically against the postmodern theorists who advocate a playful, creative approach to identity and, most importantly, define schizophrenia and multiple personalities as liberatory deconstructions of identity. Against this, Glass argues that fragmented, shattered identities are evidence of pain, not liberation. Commenting on one victim of multiple personalities, he asserts: 'Hers is not a libertory, playful experience; her multiple realities annihilate the self's emotional possibility, destroy the psychological foundations of consent, shatter the shared experiences of historical knowledge' (1993: 46).

Glass's conclusions are drawn from research he did on women suffering from schizophrenia and multiple personality disorder. The pain that these

women suffer is palpable; the disorientation of their lives is difficult to read about, much less experience. Glass makes a strong case that the unity of the self is both a difficult achievement and a necessary requirement for leading any version of a good and satisfying life. A stable identity, he argues, is necessary because it 'locates the self in the world; it defines emotional and interpersonal knowledge; it frames the self in a historical and situational context' (1993: 48). Glass concludes that utilizing schizophrenia or other identity disorders as an ideal deconstructed identity is irresponsible and insensitive to the human costs of these illnesses.

There is much that is wrong with Glass's critique. Deleuze and Guattari, the writers most closely associated with the theory of schizophrenia, define schizophrenia as a social institution that is both a product of capitalism and the possibility of its overthrow (1977). They do not, as Glass concludes, advocate that, in a literal sense, we become schizophrenics as that term is understood in psychology. The charge that theorists of the fragmented self literally advocate schizophrenia is even less applicable to Butler. Particularly in *Bodies that Matter* Butler clarifies that gender identity is not an arbitrary performance that subjects can choose at will. But on another level Glass's point is both valid and disturbing. His thesis is that selves must necessarily experience themselves as coherent entities, historically located and contingent, but enduring through time. This self allows subjects to place themselves in their historical context, to cope with the contingency of their existence. It is this self that is absent from the discussions of identity I have been analyzing.

Another critique of Butler from this perspective is that of Lynne Layton in *Who's that Boy? Who's that Girl?* (1998). It is significant that this critique comes not from the mainstream of feminist theory but from the margins, from a practicing clinician attempting to grapple with this theory of identity in the therapeutic situation. Layton attempts to reconcile postmodern identity theorists such as Butler with patients who claim to have a 'core' identity and, most importantly, find that life without such an identity is untenable. Layton's problematic is her discovery that 'there is a radical schism between postmodern celebrations of identity fluidity and what most people find it like to live an embodied, raced and gendered life in contemporary America' (1998: 25). Her goal is to bridge this gap, to use the insights of postmodern theory regarding the cultural construction of gender without losing sight of the necessity of a core self and, particularly, a stable gender identity.

Layton's answer to her problem is object relations theory. She argues that object relations theory supplies a definition of a 'core' self that is neither innate nor essential but relational. This core self provides the subject with a position in discourse from which negotiations can be made, but is itself a product of the subject's negotiations of early childhood relationships. As a clinician, Layton wants to use this concept of a core self to deal with two kinds of pain she sees in her patients. First, she wants to deal with the pain experienced by subjects who suffer because they have rejected dominant gender norms. She wants to be able to explain how these subjects came to be gender rebels, and, most importantly, how to deal with their desire for

the love and acceptance that has been denied them. Second, she wants to be able to deal with patients who lack a core self and, as a consequence, live a fragmented and tormented life. She notes: 'In postmodern work that lauds indeterminancy, fragmentation is essentialized, universalized, and celebrated in a way that seems not to acknowledge what it feels like to experience it' (1998: 124).

As an example of a fragmented self in pain, Layton refers to Butler's analysis of Foucault's *Herculine Barbin* (1980a). I would like to extend this analysis to reinforce the points I am making against Butler's concept of identity. The point of Butler's discussion is to fault Foucault for contradicting himself on the status of sexual pleasure. Foucault wants to argue that there is no 'sex' itself, but that sex is produced by the complex interactions of discourse and power. Yet in *Herculine Barbin* Foucault seems to characterize Herculine's sexual pleasures as a result of his/her 'happy limbo of non-identity' (Butler, 1990: 100). Against Foucault, Butler argues that:

> . . . the question of sexual difference re-emerges in a new light when we dispense with the metaphysical reification of multiplicitous sexuality and inquire in the case of Herculine into the concrete narrative structures and political and cultural conventions that produce and regulate the tender kisses, the diffuse pleasures, and the thwarted and transgressive thrills of Herculine's sexual world. (1990: 98)

Butler has undoubtedly scored a point against Foucault here. Herculine's deviant sexuality, like that of normative sexuality, is produced and regulated by the law of sex. What is glaringly absent in both accounts, however, is any reference to Herculine's pain, or, indeed, his/her eventual suicide. Both Butler and Foucault are so concerned with probing the discursive construction of Herculine's sexuality that they overlook this pain.[8] Herculine/Alexina is not reveling in the sexual pleasures produced by his/her happy limbo of non-identity; nor is he/she concerned with whether these pleasures are subversive or not. Herculine is in torment; his/her gender identity does not fit into the norm that his/her society prescribes. As a result he/she is deprived of the love and acceptance that all subjects seek, and, ultimately, also of life.

What would a therapist do with Herculine's pain? Clearly, the limbo of non-identity was not a happy one for him/her. Not to have a gender identity is not a happy option that produces a satisfying, healthy life. Herculine wanted an identity and the love that accompanies it, yet neither Foucault nor Butler seems willing to concede this. Nor can their theories offer any insight into how Herculine's pain could be relieved or how he/she could lead a satisfying life. On the contrary, they seem to want to use his/her pain as a vehicle for revealing and destabilizing gender norms.

Layton suggests that after *Gender Trouble* Butler moves closer to object relations theory, a move Layton defines as 'modernist'. I think that this is wrong on both counts. Butler's theory is fundamentally incompatible with object relations theory. Particularly in light of her discussion in *The Psychic Life of Power*, she requires a much more radical rejection of essential subjectivity than object relations theory provides. But I also do not think that incorporating object relations theory into a postmodern theory of identity

is necessarily a modernist more. Object relations theory supplies a core subject, but it is a core that is, like that of the postmodern subject, constituted through discourse and relational experience. It has nothing to do with essences in a modernist sense. But I do agree with Layton that postmodern theories of identity are inadequate. Layton focuses on the problems this inadequacy creates for clinicians. My interest is in the problems it causes for feminist questions of identity and identity politics.

I argued above that at the root of Butler's misconception of identity is her adherence to a rigid dichotomy: the modernist metaphysical subject on one hand and the fictional subject on the other.[9] Against Butler, I have argued that contrasting the foundational subject with one lacking any foundation at all perpetuates the dichotomy we are seeking to displace. A better alternative is to adopt a subject with a different kind of ground, a subject with a core that is constituted by relational experience rather than an absolute universal substance. Object relations theory offers the outline of such a subject.[10] It posits a core subject that is formed through relationships in the first years of life, a core self that is relational rather than innate, internal without being metaphysical. It is significant that the principal object relations theorist, D.W. Winnicott, uses the language of illusion and symbolism to describe identity. Discussing the process of maturation Winnicott states, 'At a later stage the live body with its limits, and with an inside and outside, is *felt by the individual* to form the core of the imaginative self' (1975: 246–7). In his description of the process by which the self develops, Winnicott makes no absolute distinctions between the illusory, symbolic and real dimensions of experience.[11] In an argument reminiscent of Wittgenstein, Winnicott defines the self as a kind of ungrounded ground, a core that the individual perceives to be his/her 'true' self, but that is nevertheless a product of relational experiences and illusions.

The concept of self that emerges from the work of Winnicott and other object relations theorists is neither fictive nor metaphysical, but social. Like the postmodernists, object relations theorists posit a self who is a product of social, discursive and relational forces. But unlike the postmodernists, they argue that the self that emerges from relational forces in the subject's early years is a necessity for healthy subjectivity. They assert that the self must experience itself as possessing an internal world, a core identity from which decisions are made. Instead of cavalierly dismissing this self as Connolly and Butler do, object relations theorists argue that this self makes coherent subjectivity possible.[12]

In addition to providing a viable alternative to the fictive postmodern self, object relations theory also solves another problem of the postmodern subject: the social dupe. Many critics of the postmodern subject have noted that if discourses wholly constitute the subject, we are unable to account for social rebels – subjects who escape the discursive constitution that is scripted for them. Focusing on the relational events that form the core self of each individual provides an answer to this question. We can examine the events that occur in the early years of each individual's life in order to provide an explanation for the particular pattern that her life takes. The experiences that form the core of an individual's identity, and particularly

gender identity, are multiple, contradictory and individual. They reflect broad hegemonic forces as well as idiosyncratic experiences. Object relations theorists argue that the relational events that form a core identity provide an internalized pattern that, through repetition, provides the subject with a sense of continuity and a coherent narrative (Layton, 1998: 216). But this core also contains contradictions and negations that, as the subject matures, provide a basis from which new experiences are negotiated. These new experiences can tap contradictory elements of the core and steer the subject in new directions. Butler struggles with the question of why some subjects conform to gender norms whereas others resist them. The theory of the core self can answer this by pointing to the particular relational experiences that form individual core selves (Layton, 1998: 224).

Layton looks to object relations theory as a solution to problems she encounters in therapeutic situations. It can be equally usefully applied to the problems that feminists have encountered in defining identity and negotiating identity politics. Quite simply put, the postmodern critique of identity politics rests on a concept of identity that is untenable. The chorus of critiques against the essentialism of identity politics is unanimous: identity must be fluid, inessential, fictitious, substanceless. That this concept of identity has not resonated with the participants in identity politics is now clear. Object relations theorists reveal why this is the case: the subject must experience herself or himself as a definable position in discourse, a core, coherent self. By advocating substancelessness the postmodernists are asking us to adopt a subject we know to be impossible. The participants in identity politics will never heed this critique because it asks them to adopt a subject position they cannot accept.

Beyond identity: from identity to identification

My argument with regard to feminist theories of identity, then, is that we require a concept with more substance than the postmodernists have provided. My argument with regard to identity politics will seem, on the face of it, contradictory. I argue that identity politics has too much identity in it and that we should move to a politics beyond identity. This contradiction, however, is only apparent. Both problems have the same source: a misplaced adherence to the modernist subject. The problem with the postmodern concept of identity advocated by Butler and others is that it adopts the polar opposite of the modernist subject and thus is constrained by that concept. Similarly, I will argue that it is the dominance of the modernist subject in the liberal polity that has created the problems surrounding identity politics. Feminists originally embarked on the project of identity politics because they found the political identity available to women to be inadequate. They felt excluded from the liberal polity, despite its claim to include all citizens equally. It was in an effort to reverse this exclusion that women turned first to the identity of 'woman' and later to multiple identities. These efforts to redefine political identity have led to confusions and contradictions and the present impasse over the issue of identity politics.

But identity politics has also served a valuable purpose. As it has

unfolded in recent decades, identity politics has revealed the liabilities of the 'citizen' that grounds the liberal polity. First, it has highlighted the hypocrisy of the claim to universal citizenship that informs liberal ideology. Identity politics, by illustrating the resistance to 'others' in the political arena, has revealed that the universal citizen/subject is nothing of the sort. Rather, he (*sic*) is the white male property owner of Lockean liberalism. Second, identity politics has highlighted the constitution of the modernist/liberal subject: the rational, autonomous disembodied subject of the Enlightenment tradition. Identity politics, in contrast, introduces another concept of the subject – the relational subject constituted by the social/cultural influences of his/her particular situation. Ultimately, the identities of identity politics cannot be accommodated by liberalism because they incorporate elements that the liberal subject defines as illegitimate.[13] The difficulties of accommodating policies such as affirmative action illustrates this disjunction. Citizens are not supposed to have race, class and gender; these elements cannot be accommodated in the liberal polity without violating its basic tenets.[14]

Ironically, then, the practice of identity politics has revealed why identity politics is not the solution to the problems it has revealed. Finding that, for liberalism, identity is indeed central to politics, and that conforming to a particular identity is a requirement for political participation, identity politics attempted to alter this requirement by radically redefining the citizen. Identity politics defined an array of identities that political participants could assume. The error of this strategy is that it conforms to the liberal/modernist tradition that makes a particular identity a necessary requirement of political participation. It thus perpetuates rather than transcends that politics.

As a counter to identity politics I am suggesting a politics beyond identity in a radical sense: removing identity requirements from politics entirely. This feminist politics beyond identity contains two elements. First, it entails contesting a politics that requires a singular identity for full citizenship. The neutral, disembodied citizen of liberalism concealed the hegemony of a particular subject, effectively marginalizing other subjects. We must eschew this identity and any attempt to impose an identity that excludes certain categories of individuals from political participation. The second element of my suggestion is that political participation should not be predicated on *any* conception of identity, even if a diverse array of identities is available. The old politics of liberalism/modernism was, despite its protestations to the contrary, about identity; the new politics of feminism should not be. As the experience of identity politics has shown, there is no viable way to define identity in political terms; doing so inevitably entails fixing identities. Defining identities is a slippery slope; any definition will erase differences within the category that is constructed; ultimately, each has a unique identity. The political conclusion for feminism must be a non-identity politics that defines politics in terms of pragmatic political action and accomplishing concrete political goals.

Another way of putting these points is, first, that instead of demanding that a wide array of identities be politically recognized, we should instead

demand that political institutions cease to award benefits on the basis of particular identities. For centuries the liberal polity awarded benefits on the basis of conformity to a particular subject: the white, male property owner. The effort to combat this by defining an array of identities has failed in the ways enumerated above. It is time that we acknowledged this tactic as flawed. Second, I am arguing that we move from identity politics to a politics of identification. I am advocating a politics in which political actors identify with particular political causes and mobilize to achieve particular political goals. The identifications that political actors choose are rooted in aspects of their identities; the reasons for those identifications vary, but embracing an identification does not entail fixing the whole of the identity of a citizen in a particular location. The politics of the women's movement, significantly, illustrates this point. In a strict sense, the women's movement is about identification, not identity. Many who possess the identity 'woman' have not identified with the women's movement. Those who have, embrace it as an identification that reflects a particular aspect of their identity.

At least two possible objections to this suggestion arise. First, it would seem that I am advocating what critics of traditional liberalism called the privatization of identity. My counter is that it is misleading to claim that the liberal polity privatized identity. Liberalism imposed an identity on individuals that either allowed or disallowed equal political participation. It privatized differences in the identity of universal citizen, not identity itself. Identity politics replicates this in that it demands a particular identity for political participation and imposes identities that erase differences by fixing identity. The post-identity politics that I am advocating is one that neither imposes a singular identity nor requires particular identities for political actors. Saying 'no' to identity in both cases is, I think, the best answer to identity politics.

A second objection is the claim that oppositional identities that seek to reverse demeaning stereotypes and political exclusions are necessary to the construction of a healthy political identity. In its most extreme form this objection leads to the claim that political recognition – that is, the establishment of a viable political identity – is a requirement of a healthy identity per se (Honneth, 1995). This is not a frivolous objection; it reveals the origin of identity politics as a political movement. My answer to this objection is that if we examine the mechanisms that prevent marginalized people from finding their political voice, we discover that, particularly in the USA, it is not political institutions that thwart that goal but a whole array of social and cultural institutions.

It is not difficult to find examples to illustrate this point. In their discussion of adolescent girls, Brown and Gilligan argue that the girls' sense of inferiority and limitation is imbued by their mothers and women teachers just as the girls are entering puberty (1992). Patricia Williams in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (1991) discusses an incident when she was three when she 'realized' she was 'colored'. She comments: 'I have spent the rest of my life recovering from the degradation of being divided against myself; I am still trying to overcome the polarity of my own vulnerability'

(1991: 120). The experience of being divided against oneself is one with which most women and non-whites in US society are familiar. My point here is that what creates this double consciousness is not the institutions of government but the array of social and cultural institutions in which this consciousness is embedded. I further want to argue that the remedy for this problem lies not in demanding recognition of particular identities in the political arena but, rather, in addressing the problem in the discourses of everyday life. I am adopting a Foucauldian perspective here in arguing that the problems revealed by identity politics must be addressed by using a concept of power that goes beyond that of governmental sovereignty. One of Foucault's central arguments is that we need a new concept of power that can explain the unique deployment of power in the contemporary world. He argues that we need a concept of power that does not define power as emanating from a central source, either political or economic, but, rather, defines power as everywhere – in myriad discourses and practices that permeate every aspect of our life (1980b).

The problems highlighted by identity politics – the denigration of certain categories of persons, the marginalization of those persons – are not the result of overtly political exclusions. They are, rather, the products of actions in what Foucault calls the capillaries of power, the multiple practices and discourses that form the parameters of our lives. This is where we must look to solve the problem of marginalized identity. Fixing an array of identities in the political arena does not get at the source of the problem.[15]

My approach here is not unique. The dilemma of identity politics has spawned an array of solutions by feminist theorists. Wendy Brown (1995), Nancy Fraser (1997) and Iris Young (1997) all advocate some form of post-identity politics composed of practical and pragmatic strategies rather than identity. I agree with these theorists that feminists should focus on concrete political goals rather than the identity of the political actors pursuing those goals. The advantage of the approach I am suggesting, however, is that it is radical in the technical sense of that term. It locates the root of the problem of identity politics in the errors of identity embedded in the liberal/modernist tradition. I am arguing not just that we should mitigate the dangers of fixing identity in the political arena but rather that we should remove identity from politics altogether. By making it clear that it was the 'identity politics' of liberalism that created the problem in the first place it becomes equally clear that only by eschewing identity in politics will the exclusions of liberalism be overcome.

Notes

1. By identity politics I mean the organization of political movements around specific identities – women, racial/ethnic groups, gays, lesbians, and so on – instead of around political ideology or particular political issues.
2. Both sides of the issue of identity and identity politics are discussed in *Feminism/Postmodernism* (Nicholson, 1990).

3. I make a similar argument with regard to Derrida in *Moral Voices/Moral Selves* (1995: 141).
4. See Scott (1995) for an analysis of these questions.
5. See Hirschmann (1996) and Lurie (1997).
6. For a discussion of the pan-Asian political movement from this perspective see Espiritu (1992).
7. Benhabib's concept of the 'narrative self' is another example of a critique of Butler's concept of identity that seeks a middle ground (1999).
8. Butler refers to the suicide in passing, but it is not a focus of her account.
9. Weeks makes a compatible argument (1998).
10. I do not mean to suggest that object relations theory is not itself without problems. For a critique of this approach see my *Moral Voices/Moral Selves* (1995).
11. See Flax (1990: 118).
12. Jane Flax makes a similar argument in *Thinking Fragments* (1990). In *Disputed Subjects* (1993), however, Flax seems to be moving more in the direction of Butler's position on the subject.
13. See Dietz (1992) for a similar argument.
14. I am here taking issue with Taylor's argument that identity politics can be accommodated in the liberal polity (1994).
15. Mariana Valverde makes a similar argument when she asserts that we must document the variety of ways that people are oppressed through identity formation while finding resources for change in those same identities (1999: 359).

References

Alcoff, L. (1988) 'Cultural Feminism versus Post-structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory', *Signs* 13(3): 405–36.

Benhabib, S. (1999) 'Sexual Difference and Collective Identities: The New Global Constellation', *Signs* 24(2): 335–61.

Brown, L. and C. Gilligan (1992) *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Brown, W. (1995) *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1993) *Bodies that Matter*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1997) *The Psychic Life of Power*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Connolly, W. (1991) *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Curry-Johnson, S. (1995) 'Weaving an Identity Tapestry', pp. 221–9 in B. Findlen (ed.) *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*. Seattle, WA: Seal.

Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari (1977) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. New York: Viking.

Dietz, M. (1992) 'Context is All: Feminism and Theories of Citizenship', pp. 63–85 in C. Mouffe (ed.) *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*. New York: Verso.

Espiritu, Y. (1992) *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
Findlen, B. (ed.) (1995) *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*. Seattle, WA: Seal.
Flax, J. (1990) *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Flax, J. (1993) *Disputed Subjects: Essays on Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Philosophy*. New York: Routledge.
Foucault, M. (ed.) (1980a) *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDongall. New York: Colophon.
Foucault, M. (1980b) *Power/Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon.
Fraser, N. (1997) *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition*. New York: Routledge.
Glass, J. (1993) *Shattered Selves: Multiple Personality in a Postmodern World*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Hekman, S. (1995) *Moral Voices/Moral Selves*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Hirschmann, N. (1996) 'Revisioning Freedom: Relationship, Context, and the Politics of Empowerment', pp. 51–74 in N. Hirschmann and C. Di Stefano (eds) *Revisioning the Political*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
Honneth, A. (1995) *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Jordan, J. (1994) *Technical Difficulties*. Boston, MA: Beacon.
Layton, L. (1998) *Who's that Boy? Who's that Girl?: Clinical Practice meets Postmodern Gender Theory*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
Lurie, S. (1997) *Unsettled Subjects: Restoring Feminist Politics to Poststructuralist Critique*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Nicholson, L. (ed.) (1990) *Feminism/Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge.
Phelan, S. (1989) *Identity Politics*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
Scott, J. (1995) 'Multiculturalism and the Politics of Identity', pp. 3–12, 21–31 in John Rajchman (ed.) *The Identity in Question*. New York: Routledge.
Taylor, C. (1994) *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition: An Essay*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Valverde, M. (1999) 'Identity Politics and the Law in the United States', *Feminist Studies* 25(2): 345–61.
Walker, R. (ed.) (1995) *To be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*. New York: Doubleday.
Weeks, K. (1998) *Constituting Feminist Subjects*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Williams, P. (1991) *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Winnicott, D.W. (1975) *Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis*. New York: Basic Books.
Young, I. (1997) *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Susan Hekman teaches political theory and graduate humanities at the University of Texas at Arlington. She has published in the areas of methodology of the social sciences and feminist theory. Her most recent books

are *Gender and Knowledge*, *Moral Voices/Moral Selves* and *The Future of Differences*.

Address: Department of Political Science, University of Texas at Arlington, Box 19539, Arlington, TX 76019-0539, USA. Email: hekman@uta.edu