Maintaining the Borders: identity & politics

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Contents

- hooks, b. (2000). *Feminism is for Everybody: passionate politics.* London, Pluto Press.

- LeGuin, U. (1999/1974). *The Dispossessed.* London, The Women's Press.

that reduce that suffering. Help build compassionate, co-operative institutions (e.g. social centres, support/discussion groups, mediation services, childcare support, food not bombs). Tell people when you admire or appreciate their efforts. Support people trying to change their environments (e.g. workplace resistance). Offer alternatives to people who are involved in or considering authoritarian positions (e.g. military, police, business management).

Demonstrating the pleasures and benefits of co-operative, compassionate organisation offers a strong threat to the world of borders and guards. I suspect that fragmented groups, anti-whatever demonstrations, unfriendly, exclusive meetings and utopian "after the revolution" lectures will never be quite as enticing to people outside the activist ghetto.

Further Reading

- Anonymous (1999) "Give Up Activism" in *Reflections on June 18th*. www.eco-action.org

- Begg, Alex (2000) *Empowering the Earth: Strategies for Social Change* Totnes, Green Books.

- CrimethInc. (2002) "Definition of Terms" in *Harbinger (4)*. www.crimethinc.com

- CrimethInc. (2002) "Why We're Right and You're Wrong (Infighting the Good Fight)"in *Harbinger (4)*. www.crimethinc.com

- Edwards, David (1998) *The Compassionate Revolution: Radical Politics and Buddhism*. Totnes, Green Books.

- Heckert, J. (2004) "Sexuality/Identity/Politics" in J Purkis and J Bowen (eds) *Changing Anarchism: Anarchist Theory and Practice in a Global Age*. Manchester, Manchester University Press. books.google.co.uk

Identity is the process of creating and maintaining borders, creating different *kinds of people.* This keeps the world packaged in tidy little boxes. These boxes, in turn, are necessary for the violence and domination of hierarchical societies. There cannot be masters or slaves, bosses or workers, men or women, whites or blacks, leaders or followers, heterosexuals or queers, without identity.

Social movement[1], both past and present, often attempts to use identity as a tool of liberation. Movement based on gender, sexual orientation, class, ethnic and ability identities all have some success in challenging hierarchy and oppression. By no means do I mean to diminish the impact of past and present activism. Personally, my life would have been much more difficult before feminist and gay liberation/equality movement arose. I argue that identity politics is inherently limited in its ability to challenge hierarchy because it depends upon the same roots as the system it aims to overthrow. "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."[2]

Does that mean we should all be the same?

Identity is also the answer to the question, "who am I?". This is different from answering, "what *kind* of person am I?". Labels like "woman", "white" and "heterosexual" tell us about someone's position in various hierarchies. These positions, these identities, are significant to how a person thinks of themselves. But, they don't answer the question, "who am I?". Each of us is unique, both similar and different to everyone else in various ways. Working to eliminate identity in the hierarchical sense (e.g. some animals are more equal than others) isn't the same as eliminating identity in the indi-

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[1] Following bell hooks, I refer to social movement, rather than maintaining that boundaries can be placed around identifiable "social movements".

[2] See Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House", pp110-112 in *Sister Out-sider: Essays and Speeches* (1984), who took the title from an old US civil rights adage.

vidual sense (e.g. I'll still be Jamie). When I talk about the problems with identity, I mean the "boxes" rather than individuals.

Let me use "sexual orientation" as an example. Supposedly people can be put into three boxes, depending on whether they fancy women, men or both. While this is a popular idea, it seems to cause an awful lot of suffering. People worry a lot about their image, and try very hard to make sure that others realise "what" they are. We also worry about "what" other people are — are they like me or are they different? Some people are so unhappy and anxious about these things that they attack others, either physically or verbally. Even people who think of themselves as heterosexual can be attacked. Finally, people suffer when they desire others of the "wrong" gender, or if they worry that others think they do. One alternative is that we all try to be "equal opportunity lovers" and fancy everyone. Those who succeed could then feel superior to those whose desires are less politically correct. Another alternative is that we try to give up thinking of people (including ourselves) in terms of sexual orientation and instead recognise that everyone's sexual desires are complex and unique. This would mean being yourself rather than a heterosexual, a queer or whatever, and to recognise people as people instead of members of categories. We could never all be the same, even if we tried!

What is wrong with political identity?

Identity separates people. It encourages us to believe that "we" are different from "others". Identity can also encourage conformity. How else do I show that I am *one of us* other than conforming to the accepted codes prescribed to that identity? This construction of similarity and difference exists whether we are talking about traditional identity politics groups like "disabled people" or political identities like "environmentalists". This separation of *us* from *them* has serious consequences for political movement.

mean we have to solve every problem instantly, but we must recognise that all issues are human issues. At the same time, we must not imagine that a particular system of domination (not even capitalism!) is the source of all others.

Radical politics is rarely appealing because it focuses on the evils of the world. This offers little that is hopeful or constructive in people's daily lives. If we want to see widespread social movement for radical change, we have to offer people something *they* value. Listening to people's concerns, caring about their problems and encouraging and supporting them to develop systemic solutions requires compassion. Offer people a better quality of life instead of focusing so much on depressing aspects of our current society.

We should also recognise that people positioned in more privileged categories may in some ways suffer. At the very least, people who feel a strong need to dominate and control must suffer deep insecurities, the results of competition and hierarchy. Insecurity, domination and control are not conducive to fulfilling and meaningful relationships with other people. Attacking people in "privileged" positions does little to dismantle these systems. It also gives entirely too much credit to people in those positions — they are both products and producers of systems, just like the rest of us.

To radically reorganise our society, we should aim to both diminish systematic domination and suffering and encourage systematic compassion. Just as apparently disconnected and often incoherent forms of domination can reinforce and maintaining each other, so too can a compassionate organisation of society become systematic and self-sustaining.

Encouraging people to be more comfortable with sexuality in general has been a key focus of my own political efforts. But, sexuality is only one area in which a compassionate and systematic approach has much more radical potential than politicising identity.

Find sources of suffering, whatever they are, and support and encourage people to find ways of relating to themselves and others

hierarchical social divisions (e.g. gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, class), a strategy which depends upon those very divisions can never be successful.

If political identity is such a poor strategy, why is it so common?

On a personal level, political identity makes us feel part of something larger at the same time that it makes us feel special were different. In the short-term, this can be very successful defence mechanism. For example, I'm sure I would have been a lot more damaged by the sexist and homophobic environment in which I grew up if I had not been able to convert stigma into pride. However, feeling yourself to be different and separate from other people is not a successful long-term strategy, either psychologically or politically.

What's the alternative to political identity?

If borders are the problem, then we must support and encourage each other to tear down the fences. Two crucial tools for dismantling borders are systematic analyses and compassionate strategies.

We should recognise oppression is not simply a practice of individuals who have power over those who do not. Instead, we could see how forms of organisation (including institutions and relationships) *systematically* produce hierarchies and borders. People will only see an interest in getting more involved if they realise that their individual problems — anxiety, depression, exhaustion, anger, poverty, meaningless work,unsatisfying sex lives, etc — are not unique, but are systematically produced. Furthermore, their action will only be effective if they work to reduce all forms of hierarchy and domination. Constructs including gender, sexuality, capitalism, race and the nation state are interdependent systems. Each system of domination serves to reinforce the others. This doesn't

Identity encourages isolation. Political ghettos cannot exist without political identity; and their existence reinforces it. Not only are the "activists" separated from the "non-activists", but within a broad political ghetto, *anarchists*, *feminists*, and *environmentalists* (amongst others) often see themselves as involved in separate struggles. People who consider themselves politically active are separated both from each other and from others who do not share an "ctivist" identity. Effective movement for radical social change cannot be based on such divisions.

Identity reduces social phenomena to individuals. Concepts like anarchism and racism are social. They are not embodied by individuals as terms like "anarch*ist*" and "rac*ist*" suggest. Rather, they exist as ideas, practices and relationships. In most societies, racism is inherent in our institutionalised relationships and ways of thinking. We can and should be critical of racism, but to attack people as "racists" can only further alienate them from our efforts.[3] Besides, it is a dangerous fantasy to believe that "racists" can be separated from those of us who are non-racist. Likewise, anarchism exists throughout every society. Every time people co-operate without coercion to achieve shared goals, that is anarchy. Every time someone thinks that people should be able to get along with each other without domination, that is anarchism. If we only see racism in "racists", we will never effectively challenge racism. If we only see anarchism in "anarchists", we will miss out on so many desperately needed sources of inspiration.

Identity encourages purity. If we believe that concepts like feminism can be embodied in individuals, then some people can be more feminist than others. This leads to debates about "real feminists" and how feminists should act (e.g. debates regarding feminism and heterosexuality). Feminist purity allows for hierarchy (e.g. more or less and thus better or worse feminists) and encour-

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[3] See Border Camps : The New "Sexy" Thing? in this issue.

ages guilt (e.g. asking yourself "should real feminists think/act like this?").

Political identity simplifies personal identity A related problem for feminist identity, for example, is that it demands we focus on one aspects of our complex lives. Feminist movement has often been dominated by white middle-class women who have a particular perspective on what is a "women's issue". Many women have had to choose between involvement in a woman's movement that fails to recognise ethnicity and class issues, or in black or working class politics that did not acknowledge gender. But, the alternative of specialised identity politics could get very silly (e.g. a group for disabled, transgender, lesbian, working-class women of colour). Likewise, if I describe myself as **a** feminist, **an** anarchist, and **a** sex radical, I am suddenly three different people. However, if I say I advocate feminism, anarchism and radical sexual politics I am one person with a variety of beliefs.[4]

Identity often imagines easily defined interests. Feminism is often presented as for women only; men are perceived to entirely benefit from the gender system. Many men do clearly benefit from the gender system in terms of institutionalised domination. If we perceive interests as inherently stemming from current systems, we fail to recognise how people would benefit from alternative systems. If we want to encourage and inspire people to create a very different form of society, we should share with each other what we see as beneficial. We must recognise that different value systems (e.g. domination versus compassion) result in very different interests.

Identity discourages participation. If people are worried that they might be excluded through labelling (e.g. racist or homophobic), they won't feel welcomed and won't get involved. Likewise, people do not get involved if they believe that it is not in their interests. If we pepetuate the idea that feminism is for women, men will never see how it could also be in their interests to support fem-

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[4] See pretty much anything by bell hooks for more on this.

inism. Or they might support feminism, but feel guilty for their male privilege. Either way, men are not encouraged to be active in feminist movements. Radical social change requires mass social movement. Identity politics, by definition, can never achieve this. Political identities, like "environmentalist", can likewise become a basis for minority politics.

Identity creates opposition. By dividing the world up into opposing pairs (e.g. men/women, heterosexuals/queers, ruling class/working-class, whites/blacks), identity creates opposite types of people who perceive themselves as having opposing interests. This opposition means that people fail to recognise their common interests as human beings. The opposition of two forces pushing against each other means that very little changes.

Identity freezes the fluid. Neither individual identity (the "who am I?" kind) nor social organisation are fixed, but are in constant motion. Political identities require that these fluid processes are frozen realities with particular characteristics and inherent interests. In failing to recognise the nature of both identity and society, political identity can only inhibit radical social change.

It may not be perfect, but can't it still be a useful strategy?

It is a very good strategy if you don't want to change things very much. Identity politics fits in nicely within the dominant neoliberal ideology. Groups created around oppressed identities can lobby the state for civil rights. This idea of trying to protect individuals without changing relationships or systems of organisation is compatible with the individualistic basis of capitalism and representative "democracy".

I would never argue that a strategy has to be "perfect" to be useful, but it must be consistent with its aims. Ends and means can only be separated in our minds. If the aim is to reduce or eliminate