

EDUCATION, DISCOURSE, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY ¹

Nicholas C. Burbules

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

In order to see some of the strengths and weakness of identity politics as an approach to thinking about education, we need to make a distinction that is implicit, but not explicit, in Seyla Benhabib's essay. For there are at least two distinct conceptions of identity politics at work in her discussion, and criticisms appropriate to one may not apply to the other. The first perspective considers identity a rather static quality of persons, and views the process of identity formation in predominantly passive terms; the other perspective involves what Benhabib calls "the fungibility of identity," suggesting that identities are more active and flexible constructions.² Correspondingly, each of these views yields a different view of politics; both of which, I will suggest, can be seen as quite limited, but for different reasons.

For example, many identity theorists, and postmodern feminists generally, will balk at having Catharine MacKinnon put forth as an exemplar of their views. If she is an advocate of identity politics, it is only in a very specific sense, assuming a reified identity that is decided *for* women, *by* men, who "with their foot on women's throats" do not allow them to speak for themselves. MacKinnon also has a crude, instrumental conception of power, especially in her view of the state as monolithic and fundamentally insensitive to women's concerns (as she says, "the state is male"³). As a result, her view of politics is strategic and somewhat opportunistic: she appears willing to forge single-issue coalitions with any group to advance her cause, as she has with right-wing groups in her antipornography crusade. MacKinnon's expressed sympathy for Clarence Thomas in the Hill-Thomas case is rather stunning, given her larger views on sexual harassment, and Benhabib places considerable weight on these comments as representing some larger dilemma faced by postmodern feminists in that dispute; but I do not see that MacKinnon's comments typify a position taken by postmodern feminists generally.

MacKinnon is not postmodern in any sense that I can understand, and it seems rather misleading to characterize the weaknesses of identity politics and of postmodern feminism largely through her example. If she is an identity theorist, she has a quite reified and passive conception of identity, as I have said. For MacKinnon, there is no active component in the process of identity formation; identity is constructed *for* women, imposed from without by powerful others and by hegemonic cultural norms and beliefs. And because her politics are instrumental, she seems quite willing to *denigrate* the qualities and character of many women, as we see in Benhabib's quote from the Buffalo conference, not because their actions or attitudes are in any way objectionable, but because the genesis of those choices does not comport with the vision of womanhood authorized by a political vanguard.

This sort of identity politics goes on in movements aside from MacKinnon's, of course. Some groups within so-called "new social movements" are inbred, suspicious, and convinced that *their* issues are the preeminent ones. For many of them, any *Realpolitik* to advance their cause is justified; as Benhabib rightly points out, they have no larger vision of social justice and little interest in taking on the concerns of other progressive causes.

But I do not see what is postmodern in any of this. The passive and reified sense of identity at work here, the crude conception of power, the instrumental and opportunistic politics, the embrace of

“difference” only in the sense of leaving space for other self-interested and exclusionary groups to ply their trade, all seem out of step with a postmodern outlook.

On the other hand, there is also a position stressing, as Benhabib terms it, “the fungibility of identity,” which, whatever its merits or shortcomings, refers to an entirely different strand of thought from MacKinnon’s. In such theories (Judith Butler is Benhabib’s main example here), identity can be constructed in many different ways; and while this process is contingent, it can involve choosing, shaping, and reinterpreting the identity one has. Although I do not know much of Butler’s work, it does not seem correct to characterize her view of construction as passive, as it is for MacKinnon.⁴ For Butler, and for many identity theorists, the politics of identity seems to be about the continuous formation and reformation of identity, about the free play of *différance*, and about a process of exploration and experimentation that is active and open-ended. However one judges this theoretical and political trend, it is clearly discrete from MacKinnon’s: it is postmodern in a way that her view is not, and if it has problems, they are different problems from hers.

In fact, I would say that some of these views of identity may be *too* plastic and voluntaristic. If identity is a construction, it is not a *mere* construction; we cannot choose or reshape it in any way that we please, and a theory of constructed identities needs an account of how this process occurs.⁵

It is revealing, to me, that such theoretical positions often take the construction of *sexual identity* as their model. Benhabib rightly notes the fascinating shift in some postmodern literatures, dividing issues of sex away from *reproduction* and toward issues of *sexuality*. This may be partly explained by the influence of authors writing from the vantage point of gay, lesbian, or bisexual identities. But the enormous variety of gender-bending roles (which are being discussed with a refreshing new openness) may tell us very little about identities of race, ethnicity, class, and so on, where factors we do not choose seem to play a larger role in determining who we are. As with gender in relation to sex, how we act out who we are is not necessarily determined by biological facts; but how others perceive us, and the horizons of social possibility, often are.

My point is that the fungibility of sexual identity, or gender, may be a weak basis for arguing a more generally indeterminate view of identity. It may also be a weak basis for a general theory of the body. I would agree that there has been a general philosophical neglect of the fact that we are bodies as well as minds. But it seems a legacy of the psychoanalytic tradition, even for those who do not accept psychoanalytic theory *per se*, that people assume that sex is the primal force underlying human psychological and cultural life. Yet there are other important things we do in our bodies besides having sex, and it seems to me that other bodily needs — needs for nutrition, health, physical shelter, and protection from violence, for example — may be at least as crucial for understanding identity as is sexuality, especially for the very young.

Furthermore, a voluntaristic identity politics can be very limited. When the political object of new social movements is merely to enlarge the space for identity choices, their political vision becomes anarchic and self-interested: give us the latitude to choose to be who we are and to whom we relate with the fewest institutional fetters possible (Benhabib calls this “a mindless empiricist celebration of all pluralities”). This stance implies no general view of a more just, open, or democratic society, and many crucial issues — poverty, health security, protection from crime, and so on — become submerged within a predominantly culturalist agenda. Needless to say, the sorts of issues I just described have much more to do with the concerns of poor and working class people.

New social movements will fall into transience if they view the politics of identity as simply a struggle over the conditions of self-formation. The interdependence of class, race, and gender issues ought to be considered, not as the occasional confluence of discrete single-issue interest groups, nor as the commonly decentered construction of multifarious identities. What the historical politics of class and race can teach us is that material issues of resources, of access to the protection of service institutions (including hospitals and schools), and of opportunities for employment and housing, are matters around which enduring coalitions can be built, for they raise issues of fundamental needs

and general human interests in the context of a more inclusive and compelling moral vision — even as they might be related to specific cultural concerns.

New social movements have the opportunity to enlarge this agenda by *relating* the issues that pertain to material conditions of life to moral questions about how we construct our identities and our relations with one another. Issues about the environment, AIDS, sexual harassment, animal rights, and so on, are not merely symbolic or cultural issues; nor are they necessarily single interest-group issues. Framed well, they hold promise as parts of forming durable, multifaceted coalitions; framed poorly, they are divisive and force people into the sort of “with us or against us” dichotomies that MacKinnon, among others, exemplifies.

I agree with Benhabib that the Hill/Thomas hearings illustrated the difficulties when competing progressive groups, driven by inflexible identity theories and opportunistic interest-group strategies, were unable to reconcile their narrow interests into a larger and more effective political vision. I do not agree that it illustrates a general problem for identity politics of the *latter*, more fungible sort, nor for postmodern feminism generally.

The fungibility view has a different sort of problem, I have tried to suggest. Simply because identity is constructed does not mean that we can make our identity in any way that we please. Benhabib frames the issue well when she calls for “another theory of subjectivity, one that can explain the sources of human creativity as well as victimization, agency as well as passivity.”⁶ What are some of the conditions that make possible the construction of identities that are sustainable in the face of material as well as cultural needs?

Education is one of the contexts that can be re-examined through the lens of this question. A general theory of social construction would need to respond to Benhabib’s claim that “furthering one’s capacity for autonomous agency is only possible within the confines of a solidaristic community which sustains one’s identity through mutual recognition.” In this social dialectic, discourse clearly plays a central role. I have learned a great deal from Benhabib’s work, and that of Nancy Fraser, about the “social pragmatic conception of language”:

Discourses are historically specific, socially situated, signifying practices. They are the communicative frames in which speakers interact by exchanging speech acts. Yet discourses are themselves set within social institutions and action contexts.⁷

By shifting the focus away from structures to discourses, this model provides a clearer basis for explaining the active *and* passive components of identity formation:

Complex, shifting, discursively constructed social identities provide an alternative to reified, essentialist conceptions of...identity, on the one hand, and to simple negations and dispersals of identity, on the other. They thus permit us to navigate safely between the twin shoals of essentialism and nominalism.⁸

Language, in this view, is not a structure that stands over and against us, but a social practice that we change, and are changed by, every time we participate in it. Because communicative relations are situated in specific contexts and social institutions, the possibilities *and limits* of language to allow us to engage in a reflexive examination and reconsideration of identity provide a critical lens through which those contexts and institutions can be judged. Among other contexts and institutions, this is certainly true of schools. Whether they provide the discursive resources and the opportunities to engage in the reflexive examination and reconsideration of identity, or whether, instead, they tend to reinforce static and passive conceptions of identity, determines whether their aims are educational and enabling, or merely reproductive in the conservative sense.

Yet, at the same time, this process of identity construction is not entirely flexible and voluntaristic. What the discursive model also provides is a basis for understanding how the process of constructing or reconstructing identities operates within a social context in which relations to others, material needs, and practical constraints interact with personal choices. Identities are undoubtedly

more fungible than people generally acknowledge; but the other side of this dialectic is a human need for stability and sustainability in identity. A construction, as I have said, is not a “mere” construction. From a social pragmatic standpoint not all constructions are equally sustainable, nor are they free from moral assessments. Here, too, education can play a role that is liberating, not only by opening up identity possibilities, but by teaching ways in which this process can be undertaken thoughtfully and in due consideration of its consequences for the self and for others.

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1. I would like to thank Melissa Orle for helpful conversations as I was formulating the arguments of this essay, for valuable insights into the work of Judith Butler, and for useful comments on a previous draft. Thanks also to Cris Mayo for conversations that helped inform this project.
 2. This distinction has been clarified, helpfully, in this revised, published version of her essay.
 3. Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 161.
 4. See for example, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove et al (New York: Routledge, 1993), 307-320.
 5. Butler’s most recent work takes a similar position: “A construction is, after all, not the same as an artifice. On the contrary, constructivism needs to take account of the domain of constraints without which a certain living and desiring being cannot make its way.” Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 94.
 6. Benhabib argues that Butler’s theory of the subject is inadequate for these purposes in “Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism,” in *Situating the Self* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 214-218.
 7. Nancy Fraser, “The Uses and Abuses of French Discourse Theories for Feminist Politics,” in *Revaluing French Feminisms*, ed. Nancy Fraser and Sandra Lee Bartky (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1992), 185.
 8. Fraser, “The Uses and Abuses of French Discourse Theories for Feminist Politics,” 191. For reasons that puzzle me, Benhabib does not consider Fraser’s work a version of “postmodern feminism,” because she considers it more “neopragmatist” than “postmodern” (Benhabib, “Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism,” 220-221). This seems to overlook Fraser’s own characterization of her work, but it also depends on a narrow conception of what counts as “postmodern” (which in my view can include neopragmatism and other theoretical perspectives): in this essay Benhabib uses the terms “postmodern” and “poststructural” almost interchangeably.
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