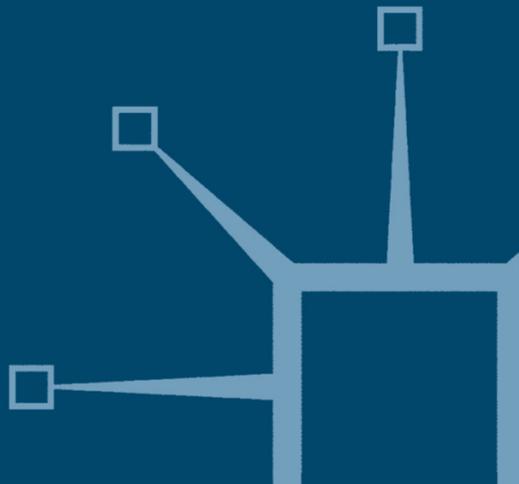# Social Constructionist Identity Politics and Literary Studies

Suman Gupta

**Social Constructionist Identity Politics and
Literary Studies**

Also by Suman Gupta

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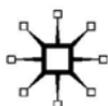A TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE READER (*co-editor with David Johnson*)

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Social Constructionist Identity Politics and Literary Studies

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Acknowledgements

1
Introduction: Prelude to Definitive Elaborations

Anti-essentialist social constructionist identity politics is becoming institutionalized in literary studies. The same could be said of other areas of academic study, across the humanities and the social sciences. Indeed the same could be said of a wide range of political, social, and cultural formations in our time. That the second part of this book is addressed primarily to the institutional practice of literary studies is a convenience, or rather is to demarcate an examinable ground on which such institutionalization can be demonstrated. I am convinced that it can also be demonstrated for other grounds; the case of literary studies in this regard is symptomatic of a larger phenomenon.

This book is written because I have misgivings about the implications of institutionalizing identity politics, as understood here, anywhere at all. These misgivings do not arise from an essentialist position; the critique of identity politics offered here is from *within* anti-essentialist commitments and social constructionist convictions. By 'identity politics' I always mean the anti-essentialist social constructionist variety in this study.

Identity politics is understood here in a rather narrow sense which needs delineation. Part I of this book is devoted, at some length, to clarifying what I understand by identity politics. This part is not addressed specifically to literary studies or to literary analysis; this discussion is undertaken mainly in terms of political and cultural analysis. Part II examines the institutionalization of identity politics in literary studies and the implications thereof.

Identity and identity politics are prodigiously discussed and debated terms, with an enormous variety of philosophical, social, and political nuances and applications. Though customary in academic writing, I do not attempt to provide a survey here of so complex a field. I begin

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instead with a brief statement of what I think identity politics is, in the narrow sense which applies here. This statement of identity politics may or may not conform to prevailing expectations – I expect, at some level, it will, or at any rate will resonate with current expectations.

Identity politics works through perceived analogues and equivalences between different identity-based political positions, and seeks thereby to extend its reach across and embrace different identity-based political positions. Identity-based political positions that are thus embraced within identity politics are centred on and among those who can embody those political positions. To embody an identity-based political position implies the following: only those who can identify themselves with or are identified with a particular identity-based collective can authentically and authoritatively assume the political position appropriate to that particular collective. Identity-based political positions are thus largely confined to those who can embody those positions; identity politics extends across such confines by exploring analogues and equivalences between different identity-based political positions, but without disturbing the logic of embodiment in identity-based political positions.

A crucial distinction is made, and relationship is drawn, here between 'identity politics' and 'identity-based political positions'. In everyday communication the phrase 'identity politics' is often used – approvingly and pejoratively – to connote what I call 'identity-based political positions' here. In academic writings 'identity politics' is usually interchangeably and confusingly used for both what I call 'identity-based political positions' and what I think of as 'identity politics' here. This study departs from the obfuscations of both current common usage and academic usage by insisting on the distinction between 'identity politics' and 'identity-based political positions'. The above statement presents the distinction but does not in itself fully explain what the distinction consists in or why it is crucial. The explanation comes hereafter.

That brief italicized statement may look and sound like a definition, but is not one. It seems to be conventional to give definitions in emphatic brief statements like that, employing an abstract and decontextualized register – whereby, as Alvin Gouldner had observed, a powerful social stratum of intellectuals validates and extends its cultural capital and assumes a (new) class character.[1] That the play of identity can be attributed where it seems to be most explicitly disavowed is a widely debated problem that this study addresses at the appropriate juncture. More to the moment, it seems to me arguable that such a brief italicized statement exacerbates rather than alleviates incomprehension, and appears to confine its address to select cognoscenti (smaller

than Gouldner's new intellectual class). Elaboration is necessary, and it is in the elaboration rather than the italicized sentences that the definition of identity politics assumed here rests.

I understand identity politics, as briefly but incompletely delineated above, to be inevitably *social constructionist* and *anti-essentialist* in character. Identity politics cannot embrace different identity-based political positions by invigorating the analogues and equivalences between them without arguing against and overcoming the essentialisms within those identity-based political positions or without mobilizing the possibilities of social constructionism. Identity politics is, therefore, in itself social constructionist in character, and seeks to purge essentialisms from the identity-based political positions that it incorporates while maintaining the logic of embodiment. The rationale behind this understanding becomes clearer in the following elaboration of the brief italicized statement (particularly in Chapters 3 and 4).

This elaboration occurs in the following consecutively arranged chapters of Part I: Chapter 2, Identity-Based Political Positions; Chapter 3, Embodying Identity-Based Political Positions; Chapter 4, Analogues and Equivalences; and Chapter 5, Identity Politics at Work.

Part I   Social Constructionist Identity Politics

2
Identity-Based Political Positions

The philosophical approach

Identity-based political positions are taken with regard to specific groups and are exercised by or for their particular memberships and, sometimes, through concordant institutions; in other words, these are positions taken with regard to, for, on behalf of, and by specific identity-based groups. For identity-based political positions, the political prerogatives of group identity generally supersede those of individual identity. The practice of politics with regard to specific group identities – national, ethnic, religious, class, race, gender, etc. – obviously precedes, usually by a long way, their being brought together under the umbrella term 'identity politics'.

The emergence of identity politics as a way of embracing all sorts of specific identity-based political positions has a fairly recent linguistic and socio-political history. One of the first, and still useful, efforts at coming to grips with this history – going back to the etymological roots of identity as sameness, and tracing the evolution of identity as formal recognition and identity as characterizing collectives – was made by W.J.M. Mackenzie (1978).[1] He traced the modern connotations of collective identity and therefore political identity to the 1950s and 1960s, to formulations of social psychology being brought to bear on the invention of area studies in the United States. It is a history that has since been rather sadly neglected. Though I do not attempt to give a systematic rendering of that history here, I do touch upon some of the significant points in it below.

Let me repeat though, the first point I wish to emphasize here is that different identity-based political positions (such as nationality-, ethnicity-, religion-, class-, race-, gender-, and sexuality-centred political

positions) place individual identity as a secondary or separate matter. Insofar as this study goes, identity-based political positions are centred on group identities as superseding considerations of individual identity. Some alignment of equivalences and analogues between these devolves into what I call identity politics here.

This observation has necessary corollaries which are germane to understanding identity-based political positions. Focusing on collective identity as superseding individual identity entails the over-determination of what we may think of as individual identity markers. Each individual has (is) a unique combination of identity markers: physiognomic features, linguistic ability, sexual proclivities and gendered experiences, education and socialization, professional abilities, history of locations and memories, cultural habits and religious beliefs, etc. A unique combination of identity markers constitutes an individual identity. Collective identity is demarcated by taking one or some such markers as a common denominator joining members of the collective, and by accepting that such markers confer a commonality of experience for members, a particular mutual understanding, an ambit of joint aspirations, and therefore some sort of allegiance. Thus, racial politics involves an over-determination of physiognomic features to demarcate collective identity; feminist politics grows through an over-emphasis of the experience and condition of being a woman; concentration on territorial location could take the form of national or regional politics; particular focus on linguistic ability and participation in communal activities and rituals coalesce into ethnic politics; and so on. Such over-determination of identity markers could also be thought of as the reduction of individual identity to an aspect (or some aspects) of itself – to become an identifiable member of the identity-based collective – for political purposes.

In presenting identity-based political positions as collective over-determinations of individual identity markers, I have acceded in some measure to a philosophical convention (especially where philosophical systems open political possibilities). With Descartian inspiration lurking in the background, philosophers sometimes habitually move from the conceptualization of individual identity to the conceptualization of collective (in various senses, simple or complex group, or simply human) identity. This occurs, for instance, in existentialist philosophy, where the individualized condition of being in-itself and for-itself is extended to a political conceptualization of freedom (a process that is best exemplified in Sartre's quest for an accommodation between existentialism and Marxism[2]). For another instance: the most uncompromising focus on individual identity with political repercussions derives, it seems to

me, from analytical philosophy. A familiar analytical philosophical question about individual identity is: what are the reasonable and sufficient conditions under which an individual I1 at a time T1 can be regarded as the same person as the individual I2 at a later time T2? It is an obdurately enclosed question, which resists and pushes consideration of collectivity to an after-the-fact prospect. Nevertheless, addressing this question opens up political positions too (where individual identity precedes collective identity), which can be regarded as the opposite of identity-based political positions (where collective identity precedes individual identity). Neo-liberals take such a position up when asserting the primacy of individual identity most single-mindedly: in Frederick Hayek's understanding of political freedom as an extension of individual freedom,[3] for instance, or Robert Nozick's visualization of the minimal state which accepts the inviolability of the individual.[4] And such a political presumption feeds into liberal politics where fairness is sought for a collective of individuals: e.g., in John Rawls's well-ordered liberal democracy drawing on an ideal contract,[5] or Derek Parfit's examination of the individual identity question to argue against self-interest propositions without offering a prescriptive political framework.[6]

I have outlined identity-based political positions so far by briefly following the philosophical convention of moving from individual to collective identity. However, importantly, identity-based political positions are markedly different from existentialist or neo-liberal or liberal political positions which follow that philosophical convention rigorously (though, confusingly, it is increasingly found that liberal politics merges into identity politics). Indeed the former are the opposite of the latter, and seek to reverse the precedence of individual identity to collective identity. Perhaps it would have been more apt to assume a different convention (not a philosophical approach) to delineate identity-based political positions. A sociological convention may be better suited, and I take that up briefly too – soon. For the moment though, the formulation of identity politics as a collective over-determination of individual identity markers is a useful one to develop this elaboration. Besides, this is a familiar way of understanding this matter. Kathleen Wallace, for instance, has examined from a philosophical perspective the relationship between the concept of an autonomous and unitary self and that of, what she calls, 'an intersectional self (typically made up of race, class, gender, occupation, ethnicity, language, and so on)',[7] to conclude that:

> 'I' functions in a location: it (partially) detaches from a location and in so doing generates the possibility of a new location or perspective. […]

Autonomous agency […] is possible because through reflexive communication a self can project itself into the future by articulating self-perspectives; its function is *its* not because it is unrelated to or undetermined by its social and other locations, but because it has the capacity to partially detach itself from some perspective(s) in some respect and articulate another perspective from itself.[8]

Novelists like Caryl Phillips and Amin Maalouf, who self-consciously occupy a position between several collective identities, also maintain a need to resist the distortions of identity-based political positions and express complex, true, tangible individual identities.[9]

It might be averred that there is another end to this equation: that of universal human interests and the politics thereof, or the identity, so to say, of society or humanity in general. This is most familiarly raised as the aspiration of old left politics when it is straightforwardly hostile to the new left's embracing of identity-based political positions (which it has commonly dubbed 'identity politics'), memorably expressed by Eric Hobsbawm as follows:

Let me state firmly what should not need restating. The political project of the Left is universalist: it is for *all* human beings. However we interpret the words, it isn't liberty for shareholders or blacks, but for everybody. It isn't equality for all members of the Garrick Club or the handicapped, but for everybody. It is not fraternity only for old Etonians or gays, but for everybody. And identity politics is essentially not for everybody but for members of a specific group only.[10]

Along similar lines was Todd Gitlin's critique of the thickening of identity politics in the new left, and the taking over of the language of universals by the academic right:

[…] there has been a curious reversal since the nineteenth century. Then, there were aristocracies who unabashedly stood for the privileges of the few. Today, the aspiring aristocrats of the Academic Right tend to speak the language of universals – canon, merit, reason, individual rights, transpolitical virtue. By the same token, they hold the Left guilty of special pleading – a degradation of standards, affirmative action (which it considers racial preference), diehard relativism. Seized by the psycho- and sociologic of polarization, committed to pleasing its disparate constituencies, an Academic Left obsessed with differences fails to reckon with commonalities.[11]

The new left response to such arguments is pithily charted in an essay by David Palumbo-Liu, who feels that they have 'a stake in both down-playing the pervasive significance of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other violent manifestations of prejudice against those who are particu-larly *identified* […], and overplaying the economic as an isolatable space outside the racial, gendered, and otherwise identified social and politi-cal spheres'.[12] Despite the association of universal claims with the old left, and the alignment of identity-based political positions with the new left, the idea of universality (and concordant claims) obviously has wider application and is contested territory itself. The desire to uphold universal interests could as well be a liberal or neo-liberal claim as a socialist one. In the sense that universality refers to society or humanity in general (everybody), the clarification of identity-based political posi-tions from that direction is best undertaken by a sociological (rather than philosophical) approach to the question of identities – which, as I said, I come to soon. But an immediate, and important, caveat should be inserted here. Though identity-based political positions are often – almost customarily now – understood as inherently opposed to univer-sal political conceptualization (are not 'homogenizing', 'unitary', or 'totalizing', in the prevailing jargon of postmodernism), they do not remain so when encapsulated by social constructionist identity politics. Separate identity-based political positions may be exclusive in a fashion that does not recognize the universality of human political interests and rationality, but when conjoined under the banner of identity politics – chained together by analogues and equivalences – we are presented with a particular kind of (disquieting) universal political conceptualiza-tion which contains and even valorizes exclusions. I am aware that this contention goes against the grain of current orthodoxies, and needs careful justification. My reasons for saying this are given below in Chapter 4, 'Analogues and Equivalences'.

There is naturally an implicit fluidity or instability in the construction of collective identities as over-determinations of individual identity markers for political purposes. Overlapping of identity markers can lead to different kinds of fractures and shifts within any identity-based polit-ical position, as can conflicting allegiances operating on overlapping members of two or more identity-based political positions. This is evi-denced continuously in the histories of different identity-based political positions. Feminist politics, for instance, has been constantly interro-gated and recast from within along the fissures of race, class, ethnicity, religion, etc., among women. Similarly, to take another kind of instance, feminist and religious politics have often tested allegiances of

overlapping memberships. The same could be said for all kinds of identity-based political positions. Indeed, the instability of identity-based political positions has come to be one of the foci of critical and theoretical attention of late, focused in discussions of multiple identities, shifting identities, contingent identities, hybridity, diaspora, etc. It is now understood that the instabilities of collective identity reveal more about the processes and power relations in identity construction than apparent stabilities, and emphasize the social constructionist rather than essentialist character of collective identities. Unsurprisingly, in attempting to introduce the current vogue of thinking about collective identities (as cultural identities), Stuart Hall observes that it is now generally accepted that:

> identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiple and constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation.[13]

Nevertheless, the constant ebb and flow of fractures and reconstitutions of identity-based political positions does not collapse into the pre-eminent emergence of individual identity in political terms. Nor do separate identity-based political positions, in themselves, merge and disappear into universal human interests and the politics which extends to all. However fractured and reconstituted, an identity-based political position remains with regard to some collective – members identified through over-determined identity markers – a smaller, or larger, or overlapped one. Identity-based political positions are always with regard to collectives, and it is as such that they are encapsulated within the (as I soon explain) all-embracing reach of social constructionist identity politics.

The sociological approach

In registering the implicit instability and fluidity of identity-based political positions, an obvious question arises: why is it that nevertheless identity-based political positions are successfully maintained and evidence high effectiveness in themselves (indeed there is increasing evidence of this)? There are several reasons for this. A more or less abstract reason has to do with the manner in which such positions are constituted. As I have remarked already, in introducing identity-based political

positions above I moved from individual identity to collective identity, and correspondingly from the unique complex of identity markers that is an individual to the over-determination of one or some identity markers to demarcate collective identity. In other words, I acceded in some measure to a philosophical convention. Arguably, however, the identity markers in terms of which both individual identity (a unique combination) and collective identity (an over-determination) are discerned above are distinguishable and available entirely at the level of the collective – at the level of social perceptions and distinctions. Race, gender, sexual orientation, class, religious convictions, ethnicity, etc., are each understood as collective matters; these terms only make sense in the continuum of collective social existence where identity is perceived, constructed, allocated, claimed, instituted, acted upon … When I approached individual identity above as a unique combination of identity markers, I was effectively characterizing the individual through given lenses of the collective, while claiming to approach the collective through the individual. So, integrity and veracity demand that the abstraction of the individual be always recognized for what it is: a sort of inference made from social discourses, perhaps even no more than nodal points constructed in the continuum of the merging and dispersing and separating of collective identities. If that account is accepted, identity-based political positions are *effective* if not stable because they derive from the social reality and experience of all individuals – the fact that all individuals are constantly being perceived, constructed, allocated, claimed, instituted, acted upon, etc., in collective identities which precede and indeed enable an apprehension of self, of individual identity. Identity-based political positions are effective, in brief, because they are closer to the bone of everyone's immediate collective existence; they are more immediately real.

This twist in the philosophical convention is perhaps most self-consciously expressed by Kwame Anthony Appiah when he seeks to insert an ethics of identity within the liberal tradition (drawn particularly from John Stuart Mill) that privileges notions of individual autonomy. He presents the individual's self-understanding as inevitably in relation to society, as constituted by 'tell[ing] a story of one's life that hangs together', and entails ethically effective 'soul making' with reference to extant models of social identity.[14] For Appiah the models of social identity that are available are precisely collective identities like race, gender, nationality, class, religion, etc. Appiah's is effectively a self-conscious insertion of a more defined *social* (as collectives) in liberal philosophical conceptions of the individual than is conventional.

However, and problematically, Appiah then strives to adhere to the liberal philosophical notion of individuality by taking the given collectives, the given society, as simply that – presumptively *given*. It is no longer necessary, it seems to be suggested, to ask 'what sort of society' or 'society in what context' or 'what kinds of social relations'; society is already prefigured by collective identities. A curious ahistoricism sets into Appiah's argument; resonant socio-historical episodes are thereafter plucked out by him in a bland soup of philosophical rationality that is indifferent to their social and historical contexts. He paradoxically reaches from a philosophical to a sociological convention and withdraws from the latter at the selfsame moment.

Despite that sort of liberal compromise, implicit in the notion that individual identity is an inference made from given collective identity-positions, whereby the precedent emphasis falls on collectivity rather than on individuality, are a range of sociological debates – or rather, the notion exposes an emphatically sociological convention (rather than a philosophical one). In choosing society as the primary object of analysis, social scientists have structured collectives and approached the individual in several ways, and in every instance with a releasing of political possibilities. Identity-based collectives and identity-based political positions are implicitly theorized in terms of discernments of different modes of division of labour, social stratifications and fluidities and tensions, dispositions of boundaries, characterization of social systems, etc., since sociology's 19th-century self-constitution and academic institutionalization. But sociology cannot and should not be regarded (though it now often appears so) as naturally inclined to a releasing of identity politics. In the sociological convention, society or collectivity is often regarded as a universal (*within* which agents, actions, boundaries, hierarchies, systems, etc., are discernible), and the consideration of individuality (if at all necessary) has often occurred in relation to society and collectivity as a universal notion. The equation between the individual and the collective in sociology, in other words, is usually understood as being mediated in various ways (including through identity-based collectives), but ultimately regarded as an equation between two universal poles: individual and society. This is amply evidenced in attempts to conceptualize individual identity sociologically. The fact that *identity* as a link between certain individuals and specific collectives had seldom been a matter of sociological reflection before the Second World War is indicative in itself. As Niklas Luhmann had argued, within the all-encompassing sociological focus on the continuous, ongoing, endlessly replicative or reproductive nature of social systems and processes in general, there is no place to

comprehend the individual except as an element that is in itself mortal.[15] However, Norbert Elias's work provides a good example of a long-drawn (from the 1930s to the 1980s) attempt to mediate precisely between individual and society, or later between 'I-identity' and 'we-identity',[16] and illustrates the use of *identity* at both ends as sociological universals.

Sociological perspectives of collective identity as incorporating individual identity in a contemporary sense (the one that applies to this study) seem to me to be formatively rooted in sociological psychology: in a pioneering fashion in George Herbert Mead's consideration of social processes that mediate understanding of self and assuming of roles;[17] in Marcel Mauss's attempt to discern the social construction of the self or person in various cultural contexts;[18] and in Erik Erikson's formulations of identity.[19] In 1975, Kenneth Hoover attempted to draw a 'politics of identity' based on these social psychological sources, but his was a very different understanding of that politics from this study's, mainly to do with invigorating the liberal political project of maximizing individual freedom while retaining a sense of community in general.[20] By 1980, however, though following similar liberal commitments as Hoover's, Peter du Preez adopted a contemporary view of identity politics as collective identity-based political positions with reservations. He felt identity-based political positions involved some agents persuading individuals to subscribe to collective 'identity frames' (similar to what I have described as an over-determination of identity markers), which he regarded as a con. He defined ideology accordingly as: 'a system of ideas adapted to the lives of some particular group of people, with some particular identity or set of identities'.[21] The 1980s also saw the growing influence of social psychological studies such as Henri Tajfel's[22] (based on intergroup discrimination experiments conducted in the 1970s), and of sociolinguistic research on collective identity construction such as John J. Gumperz's[23] (brought to notice through his BBC programme of 1 May 1979, *Crosstalk*[24]). Increasingly since the 1980s a greater body of sociological research – or greater employment of the sociological convention in political understanding – has tended towards or provided a base for identity politics as understood here (the maintenance of analogues and equivalences between different identity-based political positions). It would be tedious and unnecessary to chart this tendency closely here.

Political imperatives

An abstract argument about the immediacy of social experience to explain the effectiveness of identity-based political positions, however,

should always be regarded with a healthy measure of scepticism. The nature of political reality can be argued in several ways, and where primary emphasis should be laid for effective political theory and action is as ever a moot point. Much stronger and more contingent explanations can be adduced to understand the effectiveness of identity-based political positions. A comparatively more persuasive reason is available not so much in their constitutive characteristics as in the results of adopting such positions. Usually, once (through whatever process) an identity-based political position is assumed, it enables a political apprehension of a very large perceptual field – much larger than the confines of membership with regard to which, for which and on behalf of which it is addressed. Most identity-based political positions, in other words, enable an apparently comprehensive political explanation and analysis, embracing not only the inside of relevant collectives but also their outsides, yet always with the interests of the inside at heart. A symptomatic example may help clarify this point. A political position addressed to ameliorate the marginalization and oppression of women, for instance, must begin by understanding what it is up against. It would justifiably find that it is up against a patriarchal orientation of political discourse, whereby the modes of marginalizing women are implicitly held as based on universal and obvious truths. Such patriarchal orientation is so deepseated that it is embedded into the very syntax of language and is normalized through any attempt at expressing oneself. Seeking redress under these circumstances means trying to undermine that through which expression itself is framed – an understandably complicated affair that has exercised feminist politics and generated numerous debates and strategies. The point that interests me at this moment is that in this argument a scope of engagement has revealed itself which is enormous, which extends in all directions and to unexpected corners. It defamiliarizes the apparently obvious, it gives a key to the world at large, it comes with the force of a revelation, and opens up a political purpose that is as enticing as it is exciting. Feminist politics takes over the perceptual field and defines the agenda of the feminist in extensive ways:

> To destroy the categories of sex in politics and in philosophy, to destroy gender in language (at least modify its use) is therefore part of my work in writing, as a writer. An important part, since a modification as central as this cannot happen without a transformation of language as a whole. It concerns (touches) words whose meanings and forms are close to, and associated with, gender. But it also concerns (touches) words whose meanings and forms are furthest away.[25]

I do not quote Monique Wittig here to privilege her particular brand of feminist politics, but to give a taste of the realization and sense of agency expressed here: a taste that most of those committed to identity-based political positions would recognize. Enunciating the conditions of and agendas for an inside of racial, ethnic, gay, national, religious, etc., identity-based political positions involves apprehension of the outside – extends to disposing the entire outside in terms of the preoccupations of the inside – and often enables exhilarating political perceptions (and naturally misperceptions) and realizations and motivations.

The kind of invigorating political apprehension and purpose that is often released through identity-based political positions has another aspect, and one that provides the most likely reason for their strength and effectiveness. This has to do emphatically with the inside and out-side (continuing the conceit from the last paragraph) on the basis of which identity-based political positions extend their scope. Such political positions are of course devoted to the interests of those inside – members bearing/claiming over-determined collective identity markers – over or against the interests of those who are outside. The efficacy and strength of identity-based political positions depend on their being able to generate a sense of those inside being *threatened* or being *marginalized* (or dominated, oppressed) from without. Indeed, it would not be too far off the mark to say that identity-based political positions invariably build upon and are consolidated by a perception of being threatened or marginalized. Supremely confident dominant collectives are apt to represent themselves as humanity itself and expect all to not only endorse but also integrate. Insofar as rationality is given a geopolitical character (erroneously, for reason has more dispersed conceptual roots), as some how defining Western identity (and rooted in European Enlightenment[26]), it is sometimes understood as the absorbent and simultaneously hegemonic instrument of an imperially dominant and self-satisfied West – drawing all into itself, Westernizing in all directions. The West as representing a dominant and universalizing collective identity seems to be a commonplace of identity politics, figuring consistently with roughly similar geopolitical and ideological configurations as much in the work of the Frankfurt School (still held in place by Habermas[27]), as in that of American neo-conservatives, liberal globalization champions, and liberal post-colonial postmodernists. That a frame of dominance so pervasive across ideological zones has not yet been sufficiently interrogated and undermined is probably indicative of the need for a dominant signifier to let loose the sway of identity politics. Further, obliviousness to the fact that conjoining this signifier with

something as pervasive as rationality effectively dispossesses many developed and carefully organized civilizations and histories of rational self-understanding (along Hegel's explicitly racist lines[28]) tangentially reveals, I feel, no more than a desire to revel either in imperial self-satisfaction or in the righteousness of the marginalized and threatened.

A sense of being marginalized or being threatened, through which identity-based political positions consolidate themselves, naturally pulls in contrary directions. The contrary directions are marked by the distinction between being marginalized and being threatened.[29] The identity-based political position that is consolidated through marginal-ization pits itself against the dominant establishment wherein margin-alization occurs. Working against marginalization is an emancipative step, equivalent to striving for an egalitarian prospect, and is usually regarded as the precinct of the left. In different ways, the working-class movement, anti-colonial nationalisms, civil liberties struggles, women's movements, gay rights movements, etc., have sometimes been in that mould (much of the politics associated with those terms are *not* identity-based, as I explain in Chapter 3, 'Embodying Identity-Based Political Positions'). Working against threats from outside, on the contrary, is a conservative step; protecting itself from infiltration by a numerous and undesirable other is the arena of a dominant but not-too-confident right. Identity-based political positions that consolidate themselves against threats are protectionist rather than emancipationist. White supremacists, male chauvinists, fundamentalists identified with domi-nant religions in different contexts (Christianity in USA, Islam in Saudi Arabia, Hinduism in India, etc.), homophobes, fascist nationalists, etc., are usually associated with identity-based political positions that con-solidate themselves against threats. There are, of course, many interme-diate shades of identity-based political positions. When George Bush and Tony Blair speak of the need to protect the West (or *our* people) from the threats of the outside, they are dominant and not-too-confident protectionists playing on rightist identity-based politics. When they simultaneously proclaim the need to integrate (by force) the world into liberal democracy, they assume the garb of the supremely confident dominant imperial alignment which eschews identity-based political positions and speaks for all humanity. When, at the same time, they champion the causes of what passes as pluralism and multiculturalism, they play with leftist identity-based politics against marginalization. It is clearly possible to unite these contrary and immiscible strains in political practice. But, at least conceptually, these strains should be held apart – and as far as this study goes, are held apart here.

To many, my bringing together of the leftist and rightist identity-based political positions within the same conceptual space would seem unwarranted. Emancipationist and protectionist impulses obviously seem to belong to opposite ends of the political spectrum, implacably opposed to each other. But insofar as these opposite ends subscribe to identity-based political positions, they are joined by a structural similarity – they simply reflect each other and are defined by each other. This is a very well-known phenomenon: anti-colonial nationalism could, with a change of circumstances, turn into fascist nationalism; black supremacism (negritude) may become a mirror image of white supremacism; radical feminists may exercise a similar sort of exclusionist violence as male chauvinists; proletariat revolutionaries can become governing elites and indistinguishable from their bourgeois forebears; reform religions can be as oppressive and repressive as the dominant religions they seek to replace; and so on. Under the banner of emancipative identity politics – where equivalences and analogues between different (particularly marginalized) identity-based political positions are played up – efforts to oppose this kind of mirroring of right and left identity-based political positions are understood as opposing 'essentialism'. Anti-essentialist identity politics exhorts amenable marginal identity-based political positions not to become reflexive of their conservative opposites. However, the critique of essentialism within identity politics, against the essentialist tendency of specific identity-based political positions, appears to me to be a red herring – a simplistic misdirection to draw attention away from a complex and widely accepted and disturbing strategy. The critique of essentialism is addressed squarely in Chapter 3, 'Embodying Identity-Based Political Positions'.

A final point remains in these remarks on identity-based political positions, and one that takes me away from reasons for their effectiveness despite their inherently unstable nature. The articulation of an identity-based political position – articulation that is poised somewhere in the balance of being for, on behalf of, to, in the interests of an identity-based collective – inevitably involves the acceptance of something outside the field of articulation. It comes with the weight of something that is beyond interaction between individuals (in principle, anyone who happens to be there and knows the language and the idiom and context in question), and is greater than the cohabited arena that is mapped and constituted and apprehended through a mesh of such communicative processes (discourses). The articulation of an identity-based political position emanates as if from/of/to/for an identity-based collective *itself*. This is a condition whereby the emanation of such articulation comes

always with the weight of the collective itself behind it, as greater than he/she who speaks and anyone who may hear and respond. I think of this excessive and inarticulable weight that pushes the articulation of identity-based political positions forth – emanating as if from the collective itself, from beyond personal feelings and a pervasive ability to think and understand – as the manifestation of a claim to authenticity. This mode of enforcing the weight of an abstraction as if it speaks itself, as if it has a sentient presence, is far from being confined to the expression of identity-based political positions alone. Other kinds of political positions do this too, but rarely. It occurs, I suppose, wherever the articulation of a politics resists open debate and interrogation. In fact another kind of political articulation which was charged with a similar manoeuvre may be cited here to make this point clearer. I have in mind Adorno's critique of the existentialist (primarily addressed to the work of Buber, Heidegger, and Jaspers) 'jargon of authenticity', particularly in the following general observation:

> The resonant directive of the jargon, that its thought should not be too strenuous, because otherwise it would offend the community, also becomes for these people the guarantee of a higher confirmation. This suppresses the fact that language itself – through its generality and objectivity – already negates the whole man, the particular speaking individual subject: the first price exacted by the subject is the essence of the individual. But through the appearance that the whole man, and not thought, speaks, the jargon pretends that, as a close-at-hand manner of communication, it is invulnerable to dehumanized mass communication – which is precisely what recommends it to everyone's enthusiastic acceptance. Whoever stands behind his words, in the way in which these words pretend, is safe from any suspicion about what he is at that very moment about to do: speak for others in order to palm something off on them.[30]

For Adorno 'the whole man' – existential being in-itself – is the abstraction to which existentialists seek to give a political voice, to derive a 'higher confirmation' from, at the expense of thought and the nature of language. The identity-based collective is a smaller abstraction which assumes similar proportions in identity-based political positions, and thereby in identity politics. Adorno's references to 'the essence of the individual' and to 'dehumanized mass communication' are themselves drawn from a critical jargon which does not need immediate elucidation. They are close enough to discussions of individuals and collectives,

with both philosophical and sociological conventions, which I have referred to already, to be comprehensible.

If at the moment the presentation of that last point appears to be too abstruse, I hope that as I progress through Chapter 3, on 'Embodying Identity-Based Political Positions', the idea becomes clearer.

3
Embodying Identity-Based Political Positions

The argument of this chapter can be summarized as follows. Within different identity-based political positions a great deal of energy has gone into the debate between essentialism and social constructionism. In embracing different identity-based political positions through analogues and equivalences, social constructionist identity politics has derived from and has assumed the terms of that debate to maintain certain limits within itself, and has thereby constrained the potential and reach of social constructionist and anti-essentialist thinking. The logic of this is examined in the first section of this chapter. It is also maintained here that inordinate attention to the essentialism vs. social constructionism debate within identity-based political positions is a distraction from a deeper problem. This problem has to do with the logic of *embodiment* which works in both essentialist identity-based political positions and social constructionist ones. Because it works in the latter too, it slips through into the identity politics which tries to embrace different identity-based political positions, with worrying results. The distinctive logic of embodiment in identity-based political positions, which is transferred into social constructionist identity politics, is examined in the second section of this chapter. There have been and it is possible to have, I observe later, identity-based political positions that are not premised on being embodied; *this critique is particularly addressed to identity politics that embraces identity-based political positions insofar as such positions are embodied.*

Going beyond the social constructionist vs. essentialist bind

Two tasks are implicit in that preliminary summary of this chapter. First, the main points of the debate between essentialism and social