Identity
Politics
Reconsidered

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Identity Politics Reconsidered

The Future of Minority Studies

A timely series that represents the most innovative work being done in the broad field defined as "minority studies." Drawing on the intellectual and political vision of the Future of Minority Studies (FMS) Research Project, this book series will publish studies of the lives, experiences, and cultures of "minority" groups—broadly defined to include all those whose access to social and cultural institutions is limited primarily because of their social identities.

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*To all of the participants in the Future of Minority Studies Project,
and especially to the members of the FMS Junior Scholars Caucus*

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Reconsidering Identity Politics: An Introduction

Linda Martín Alcoff and Satya P. Mohanty

Go down Moses
Way down in Egypt land
Tell old Pharaoh
Let my people go . . .

***

Freedom's name is mighty sweet
Soon some day we're gonna meet

Got my hand on the freedom plow
Wouldn't take nothing for my journey now

The only chain that we can stand
Is the chain of hand in hand . . .

***

As we come marching, marching
We bring the greater days
For the rising of the women
Means the rising of us all
No more the drudge and idler
Ten that toil where one reposes
But a sharing of life's glories
Bread and roses, bread and roses

***

Just a few years ago, the great political movements that profoundly transformed American society—the movements demanding voting rights, civil rights, and equality for various disenfranchised groups—were generally viewed as the natural extension of liberal ideals. These identity-based liberation movements were viewed by many Americans as *confirming* rather than *challenging* democratic institutions, and *expanding* rather than *threatening* popular political values. Recently, this positive view of minority social movements has been transformed. Identity-based liberation movements and their

politically active constituencies, which include ethnic and racial groups, women's groups, gay and lesbian groups, and disability groups, have come under sustained attack by people on both the Left and the Right of the political spectrum in the debates over multiculturalism, identity politics, and political correctness. Thinkers as different in their political perspectives as Nathan Glazer and Judith Butler seem to agree at least on this one point— that identity-based social struggles are politically limited and misguided. Identity-based groups are widely portrayed as having an "agenda," they are called "special interest groups," and their leadership is often portrayed as opportunists uninterested in, even opposed to, the common public good. For those on the Right, these movements appear to be threatening individual freedom, while for those on the Left, they are seen as threatening the progressive coalition and wallowing in victimization. Thus, social movements associated with identity politics have been castigated by the left, right, and center, no longer enjoying their previous wide support.[1]

Historically, identity politics has had both an activist and an academic existence. Activists involved in successful social movements, such as the civil rights movement and the women's movement, who self-consciously invoked the concept of identity in their struggles for social justice held at least the following two beliefs: (1) that identities are often resources of knowledge especially relevant for social change, and that; (2) oppressed groups need to be at the forefront of their own liberation. In viewing their politics as "identity politics," activists involved in these movements were trying to sum up—and deepen— the lessons they had learned from the oppressed. Crucially, these successful social movements were led, never exclusively but primarily, by the oppressed themselves. And they have profoundly transformed society for the better.

The idea of identity politics has also been a grounding assumption of the new identity-based scholarly programs that have developed and grown in almost all universities and colleges since the 1960s. The student and intellectual activists who fought for women's studies, black studies, Chicano studies, and other identity-based programs believed that better, more truthful, and less distorted scholarship on the lives and experiences of marginalized identity groups would be more likely to come about when the faculty in the academy itself became more inclusive and diverse. And this belief has been borne out: a wealth of new questions about economic disparity, social violence, and cultural hierarchies has been put on the table for researchers across the disciplines to address. As Juan Flores shows in his essay in this volume, the development of minority studies programs that have thought consciously about the relationship of identity to culture and to knowledge has enhanced our collective understanding of academic study generally and its claims to universality.

Despite the successes of identity-based movements, however, identity politics has been criticized in both the political and the academic realms. It has been attacked not only by the reactionaries who opposed the goals of left progressive social movements and the purpose of identity-based scholarship, but also by some former supporters who have become concerned about

an overemphasis on difference and identity at the expense of unity. Political critics of identity politics claim that it fractures coalitions and breeds distrust of those outside one's group. Theoretical critics of identity politics claim that identities are social constructions rather than natural kinds, that they are indelibly marked by the oppressive conditions that created them in the first place, and therefore should not be given so much weight or importance. They point out, with some justification, that racial categories are specious ways to categorize human beings, that gender differences are overblown, that sexuality should be thought of as a practice rather than an identity, and that disability itself is often the product of social arrangements rather than a natural kind. These and other sorts of arguments are used to suggest that identities are ideological fictions, imposed from above, and used to divide and control populations. Both political and theoretical critics claim that we should be working to eliminate the salience of identity in everyday life, not institutionalize it.

We, the editors of this volume, believe that these critiques of identity politics are largely mistaken, too often based on anecdotes about incidents where specific groups used poor political judgment rather than empirical studies of identity-based movements from which a larger analysis of their effects can emerge. And yet, we also believe that some of the concerns that the critics raise are important and legitimate and worthy of discussion. Without a doubt, the social movements of the twenty-first century require a new language of liberation. We cannot enshrine any previous period as holding the key to our pressing political needs today—neither the era of the great anticolonial national liberation movements, nor the era of the progressive united front labor-led movements, nor the era of minority movements for equality. Neither can we assume that having a common enemy is sufficient to maintain alliances. History has lessons to teach us that we would do well to learn. The New Left of the 1960s, for example, was particularly inept in addressing the complexity and variety of identity-based forms of oppression. Any attempt to resuscitate its formulations—of mechanically privileging class over race, for example—will simply re-invite the previous splits. Rather, we need new accounts of the relationships among our various identities; we also need new ideas about how to make common cause across differences of privilege and geography. We need new thinking.

This volume is an attempt to create the conditions for such new thinking as we reopen discussion about the viability of identity politics for social movements, for scholarly programs of research, for pedagogy, and for democratic politics generally. Collected in *Identity Politics Reconsidered* are essays by a stellar list of intellectual activists, all of whom have participated in or responded to the various social movements of the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Readers of the volume will find a lively critical debate from leading theorists of ethnic studies, women's studies, gay and lesbian studies, and disability studies over what should, and should not, be learned from the extensive criticisms of identity politics. As intellectuals, the editors and the authors of the essays in this volume

understand the importance of remaining open to criticism and debate even over the very foundations of our political movements. But as activists, we perceive the need to go beyond simply criticizing liberation movements in order to see what can be done to improve and strengthen them. This volume thus seeks to reinvigorate the intellectual analysis of our progressive visions and goals by returning to the issues raised by the identity-based movements themselves, by revisiting questions that we think have been settled too quickly by many thinkers, especially those based in the academy. As one author here—José David Saldívar, former director of Ethnic Studies at Berkeley—explains, the aim of this volume, and of the project that gave rise to it, is to "encourage in-depth, cross-cultural comparisons within the general field of minority studies in the U.S." In this volume, and in The Future of Minority Studies (FMS) Project more generally, we are taking the recent spate of criticisms as an opportunity for reassessment; we are working to formulate an answer that will address both the political and epistemological grounds for the unity of identity-based social movements and their political and theoretical contributions to social justice.

The Future of Minority Studies Research Project

All of the essays in this volume were written in response to a few basic questions posed by the editors of the volume to the authors of the essays within the larger context of The Future of Minority Studies Research Project. The four editors of this volume began the collaborative endeavor that is the FMS project in 2000 by putting together a team of intellectuals and asking several prominent scholars (many of whom are represented in this volume) to give serious reconsideration to the significance of identity for our knowledge-generating practices (for more on the FMS project, see www.fmsproject. cornell.edu). A series of conferences and meetings over several years at Stanford University, Cornell University, Binghamton University, the University of Michigan, Hamilton College, and the University of Wisconsin explored in some depth three questions we posed to the participants—questions that arose primarily in the context of postmodernist deconstructions of such key concepts of identity, experience, and knowledge. Our first question was

1. What is the epistemic and political significance of identity?

Insofar as we had been interrogating the postmodernist view that identities are purely arbitrary, and hence politically unreliable, the editors of this volume wanted to ask how and when taking identities into account may be justified, both politically and theoretically. In our own theoretical work as realists about identity, the founding members of the FMS project had offered alternative views of subjective experience—which many deconstructionists in particular dismiss as epistemically suspect—and explored the links between defensible notions of subjective experience and objective social location (see texts cited in note 2). Minoritized peoples often use subjective experience to

criticize and rewrite dominant and oppressive narratives. The legitimacy of some subjective experiences, we argue, is based on the objective location of people in society; in many crucial instances, "experiences" are not unfathomable inner phenomena but rather disguised explanations of social relations, and they can be evaluated as such. This recognition led us to wonder whether the rigid anti-objectivist stance that seems to dominate literary and cultural studies was justified and adequate. So our second question for our participants was

2. What role, if any, should a non-positivist notion of objectivity play in our intellectual and political endeavors?

The question about the nature of objectivity, and specifically about objectivity as an epistemic and social ideal, underlies many debates within the humanistic disciplines. Our goal was to connect the more local debate over identity politics to the general discussion of identity as an analyzable—and even "objective"—social phenomenon. We wanted, in other words, to dig a bit deeper than the polemical defenses or critiques of identity politics allow for; we wanted at the very least to ask if social activism, including identity-based activism, could in fact be seen as a form of legitimate social inquiry, one that often complements and indeed deepens more distanced and disinterested forms of academic analysis.

It is in the context of our emphasis on a reconsideration of the notion of objectivity and of social activism and its epistemic component that we posed our third question, about the role of moral universalism.

3. What is the place of moral universalism in struggles for social justice? (Is a focus on identity-based struggles compatible with moral universalism?)

Several of us had been arguing in our published work that respect for minority identity (and hence for some forms of cultural pluralism) complements and deepens the kind of moral universalism that most people implicitly accept and live by today. Such universalism is evident most clearly in the commitment to equality or basic human rights on which many modern constitutions and international legal documents, as well as progressive traditions of moral and political dissent, are based. We further argued that cultural pluralism and moral universalism can be complementary notions in part because social identities are often sources of objective knowledge about our world. Acknowledging the epistemic resources of identity enhances the possibility of knowledge and of achieving understanding across difference.

The Realist Theory of Identity

The collaborative group of scholars who initiated and coedited this collection has been working for a number of years on the intellectual foundations of

minority, identity-based, scholarship. Key to our work has been the "realist" theory of identity, an approach to the question of identity that is better able than the postmodernist one to register and analyze the *complexity* that resides at the heart of identity-based political struggles and the subjective experiences on which these struggles draw. Although agreeing with some of the anti-essentialist critiques of identity that have been working to denaturalize identity categories, we argue against the conclusion that identities are merely fictions imposed from above. We contend that identities can be no less real for being socially and historically situated, and for being relational, dynamic, and, at times, ideological entrapments. Moreover, we believe that identity-based knowledge can achieve objectivity, not by the (unachievable) ideal of the disinterested, passive observer, but through a more workable approach to inquiry that aims to accurately describe the features of our complex, shared world. This postpositivist approach to realism, to identity, and to objectivity can yield new liberatory language, less fraught with the limitations and hubris of the 1960s era of national liberation movements, and capable of responding to more current criticisms and political needs.

Realists about identity define identities as "socially significant and context-specific ideological constructs that nevertheless refer in non-arbitrary (if partial) ways to verifiable aspects of the social world," as Moya explains in her essay here. Identities are markers for history, social location, and positionality. They are *always* subject to an individual's interpretation of their meaningfulness and salience in her or his own life, and thus, their political implications are not transparent or fixed. They are like theories, as Mohanty has put it, that can be tested for their ability to reveal and explain aspects of our shared world and experiences. Thus, identity claims cannot only be specious, narrow, and incorrectly described, but they can also be plausibly formulated and accurate.[2]

Realists about identity further argue that identities are not our mysterious inner essences but rather social embodied facts about ourselves in our world; moreover, they are not mere *descriptions* of who we are but, rather, *causal explanations* of our social locations in a world that is shaped by such locations, by the way they are distributed and hierarchically organized. The real debate is not over whether identities have political relevance, but how much and what kind. The theoretical issue concerning identities is not whether they are constructed (they always are, since they are social kinds) but what difference different kinds of construction make.

Very simply put, then, the core ideas that emerge from the realist theory of identity are these: Social identities can be mired in distorted ideologies, but they can also be the lenses through which we learn to view our world accurately. Our identities are not just imposed on us by society. Often we create positive and meaningful identities that enable us to better understand and negotiate the social world. They enable us to engage with the social world and in the process discover how it really works. They also make it possible for us to change the world and ourselves in valuable ways. This is what democratic and progressive social movements, such as the struggles for civil rights or the equality of women, show very clearly.

Like identities, identity politics in itself is neither positive nor negative. At its minimum, it is a claim that identities are politically relevant, an irrefutable fact. Identities are the locus and nodal point by which political structures are played out, mobilized, reinforced, and sometimes challenged. As Jack Tchen in this volume argues, identities make a real difference in the classroom or any pedagogical situation, and ignoring them is foolhardy for any educator, whereas recognizing them has the potential to enhance democratic and participatory pedagogies. Obviously, identities can be recognized in pernicious ways in classrooms or in society generally, for the purposes of discrimination. But it is a false dilemma to suppose that we should *either* accept pernicious uses of identity *or* pretend they do not exist.

Minority Studies

We are aware that the use of the term "minority" in the title of our project, "The Future of Minority Studies," requires some explanation. The term minority has become passé in some quarters for two very good reasons: first, because, the "racial" groups classified within the West as "minorities" are not minorities globally, and second, because the demographic changes in the West itself indicate that European Americans will lose their majority status, at least in some countries such as the United States, in just a few decades. Minority studies, as we will use the term here, refers to areas of scholarly work that are related to social identities and that have emerged from liberatory social movements. As such, these bodies of knowledge have been doubly devalued, or minoritized, within the academy: associated with scholars who face a general intellectual discrimination as a spillover from social prejudices, and attacked as inquiry that fails to achieve the ideal of academic disinterestedness. Social identities themselves, especially racial and ethnic ones, are often seen today as nonobjective in the sense that individuals are believed to have a completely free choice about how much to emphasize or even acknowledge their own race or ethnicity. Those asserting the salience of identity are seen as opportunists, choosing to emphasize an outdated classification, or stuck in dysfunctional patterns of resentment.

This volume represents a critical debate among leading scholars over the viability of identity politics in the context of minority studies. Besides the problems with the term "minority" mentioned above, the term can also have the effect of overemphasizing the issue of numbers when the issue really is one of power. Our working definition of "minority" refers to power rather than numbers; it seeks to connect contemporary uses of this crucial term with older debates about the nature and goals of democracy, especially since in formal political democracies power is not shared equally and social groups (defined by gender, race, or sexuality, or disability, for instance) often have unequal access to it. As we are combining a discussion of broadly different movements and programs of inquiry, "minority" is a convenient way to incorporate the diversity of differences and forms of oppression we are concerned to bring into dialogue. We use the concept of minority in three senses: conceptual, political, and institutional. Conceptually, minority

signifies the nonhegemonic, the nondominant, the position that has to be explained rather than assumed, or the identity that is not taken for granted but is on trial. Politically, minority signifies a struggle, a position that is under contestation or actually embattled, that does not enjoy equality of status, of power, or of respect. Institutionally, minority studies have been made up by necessity of whatever has been excluded from the canon and the mainstream work of the disciplines, the afterthought of the academy, if thought at all. Thus, our use of the term is meant to foreground power relations rather than mere numbers. In none of these senses of the term just explained—conceptual, political, and institutional—is the existing meaning of any category of identity taken as inevitable, unchangeable, or determined.

The term minority also invokes a national context, which is only natural because it is a relational term. What is classified as minority only becomes clear against the background of a given dominant majority. Yet, just as minority-based studies need to pursue more cross-identity comparisons and dialogues, so too do we need to think of minority studies in a global context as well as a local or national one. Especially in the era of "neo-liberalism" those engaged in struggles against dominance internally need to consider how their actions affect those who are struggling against the same forces of domi-nation internationally. To make possible the grounds for coalition, we must come to understand the difference that global positionality makes, and thus we need to bring the concept of minority into a global context.

The key to all of these issues is identity, and our core claim is that identities matter politically. Identity politics is not new: as the epigraphs that open this introduction indicate, identity-based movements of political liberation have been vibrant in the West since at least the nineteenth century. Abolitionist and suffrage movements grappled with the conflicts among and within identities, with the role identity should play in determining leadership, and with whether the ultimate goal should be championing identity-based rights or de-emphasizing identity categories. Identity politics is only the most recent name given to this nest of issues concerning questions of separatism, nationalism, humanism, and the possibilities of a united front.

The contributors to *Identity Politics Reconsidered* address and debate the questions we have posed to them regarding the epistemic status of identities, the possibility of objectivity, and the role of universalism in struggles for social justice, even though it will be clear to the reader that the questions will continue to animate discussion and debate. It is our hope that this volume will serve as a springboard for further discussion of these issues, keeping the practical and urgent question of identity politics as the central problem to be explored. We will not attempt to summarize the complex discussions that take place in the pages of this book. Suffice it to say, however, that there is a very wide range of positions articulated here. All of the contributors deal squarely with the underlying problematic of identity and cultural politics and contribute to a clarification of the main issues that we need to explore further. At the most basic level, this volume is an engagement with the contemporary moment, as well as—inevitably—an invitation to readers to

continue the discussion. We will be happy if the volume reopens debate about this vital topic, enabling readers to engage the present more fully and encouraging us all to think about the future—the future as it can be imagined only through the concrete shapes of new, transfigured identities.

Notes

1. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991); Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italian, and Irish of New York City*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1970); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked with Culture Wars* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995).

2. The realist theory of identity has been elaborated in the following publications since the mid-1990s: Satya P. Mohanty, "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition," *Cultural Critique* 24 (Spring 1993): 41–80; Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997; New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Paula M. L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-García, eds., *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Linda Martín Alcoff, "Who's Afraid of Identity Politics?" in *Reclaiming Identity*, 312–44; Hames-García, "'Who Are Our Own People?': Challenges for a Theory of Social Identity," in *Reclaiming Identity*, 102–29; Tobin Siebers, "Disability in Theory: From Social Constructionism to the New Realism of the Body," *American Literary History* 13.4 (2001): 737–54; Moya, *Learning From Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Hames-García, *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2006) and Sean Teuton, *Red Land, Red Power: Grounding Knowledge in the American Indian Novel* (forthcoming 2006).

Disability Studies and the Future of Identity Politics

Tobin Siebers

I

Nobody wants to be in the minority. People angle not to be left alone in a dispute, and those who risk to be seek the protection of those like them to lend greater weight to their social power. We all seem to share a basic intuition about what it means to be human and to face a community of others created by our exclusion. But the fear of being in the minority exerts pressure beyond the influence of social conformity. It carries tremendous weight in political and social theory as well, where minority identity appears as a category that will not go away, even though many political theorists give only a minor place to it. Liberal political theory, for example, is based on the expectation that minorities will eventually disappear as they become fully integrated into a single polity. For liberals, a utopian society with a minority population is inconceivable. If it is the case, however, that minority identity is not destined for extinction, it may be worth considering it as a factor in all political representation. Identity politics is often associated by its critics with minority groups, but it is crucial to a vision of democratic society in its complex entirety. For identity politics makes it possible to conceive of democratic society as comprising significant communities of interest, representing minor affiliations and different points of view that need to be heard and included if democratic society is to continue.

At nearly 20 percent, people with disabilities make up the largest minority population in the United States, unless one considers women at 51 percent as a structural minority. Moreover, only 15 percent of people with disabilities were born with their impairment. Most people become disabled over the course of their life. These statistics suggest why people with disabilities do not present immediately as either an identity or minority group—which makes it theoretically important, I insist, to include them in any discussion about the future of identity politics. On the one hand, people with disabilities are not often thought of as a single group, especially as a political group,

because their identities are too different from each other. Which political interests do blind, elderly, and paralyzed people share? On what basis do we consider them as having an identity in common? Is a woman cognitively disabled from birth like a man who receives a head trauma in a farming accident? On the other hand, the nature of disability is such that every human being may be considered temporarily able-bodied. The number of disabled in any given society is constantly on the rise, as more and more people age, have accidents, and become ill, and this fact is obscured only by controlled accounting practices that refuse to admit some disabilities into the statistical record. There are, for example, nearly 50 million disabled in the United States, but this number does not include people who wear eyeglasses, those who take medication for hypertension, the learning disabled, or people with AIDS or HIV. Neither does it include the elderly, many of whom cannot climb stairs or open doors with ease, nor children, whose physical and mental abilities fit uncomfortably with the adult world. The disabled represent a minority that potentially includes anyone at anytime. Their numbers may be increased by natural disasters, warfare, epidemics, malnutrition, and industrial accidents—not to mention by simple acts of redefinition. By what logic, then, do we consider people with disabilities as a minority group?

Disability seems to provide an example of the extreme instability of identity as a political category, but it would not be easy, I think, to prove that disability is less significant in everyday life for being a category in flux. In fact, that disability may take so many forms increases both its impact on individuals and its significance in society. Here I consider the future of identity politics from the perspective of the many forms of disability—and with two related emphases in mind. First, I insist that disability studies requires one to think with greater flexibility about what constitutes both an identity and a minority group. People with disabilities build political coalitions not on the basis of natural identification but on the basis of health-care needs, information sharing, and support groups. Most obviously, disability requires a broad consideration of identity politics beyond communities of interest based on race, nation, class, gender, and sex, and for this reason, it is crucial both ethically and theoretically to give a place to disability in the field of minority studies. Second, I want to engage disability studies with two theories important to identity politics: social constructionism and philosophical realism. Both are at bottom social theories—each one offers a different way of thinking about political representation dependent on identity—and yet it is not clear that either theory has yet found a way to incorporate the many forms of disability. My specific goal here is to use disability to put pressure on both theories in the hope that they might better represent the concerns of people with disabilities. I begin with social construction because it has played a crucial role in the emergence of disability studies, especially in the humanities. I then turn to the less familiar arguments of philosophical realism. My conclusion will be that if social construction has defined the past of disability studies, philosophical realism may well be in a position to influence its future.

II

The theory of social construction is fundamental to current thinking about the disabled body and mind—and with good reason—because it provides a major alternative to the medicalization of disability. The medical model lodges defect in the individual body and calls for individualized treatment. Medicalization has at least two unsettling effects as a result: it alienates the individual with a disability as a defective person, duplicating the history of discrimination and shame connected to disability in the social world, and it affects the ability of people with disabilities to organize politically. Since no two people with a disability apparently have the same problem, they have no basis for common complaint or political activism. Storied language mocks the idea of "the blind leading the blind," but the medicalization of disability really does create a situation where it is extremely unlikely that a blind person will be allowed to take a leadership position in the blind community, let alone in the sighted community. The world is divided, as Susan Sontag put it in *Illness as Metaphor*, into the kingdom of the well and the sick, and although we all possess dual citizenship, the disabled usually lose their civil rights in the kingdom of the well, especially once they enter the doctor's office (1).[1]

The social model challenges the idea of defective citizenship by situating disability in the environment, not in the body. In a society of wheelchair users, stairs would not exist, and the fact that they are everywhere in our society reveals only that most of our architects are nondisabled people who care little about the problem of access. Disability seen from this point of view requires not individual medical treatment but changes in society. Social constructionism has changed the landscape of thinking about disability because it refuses to represent people with disabilities as defective citizens and because its focus on the built environment presents a common cause around which they may organize politically. More generally, social construction offers advantages for the political representation of the disabled because it demonstrates the falseness of any claim for political identity based on natural kind. It reveals that gender, race, sex, nationality, and ability are heterogeneous, indeterminate, and artificial categories represented as stable or natural by people who want to preserve their own political and social advantages. It is not surprising, then, that many of the major theorists of disability in recent years have adhered to the social model.

That identity is socially produced means in theory that minority groups like the disabled may challenge their own identities, allowing greater freedom and mobility in the social world. In practice, however, the social model does not seem to be as viable an option for the identity politics of people with disabilities as one might think because social constructionists remain in the end highly skeptical about any form of identity. Critics of identity politics remind, for example, that no two women are alike and that "woman" is not a coherent political category. They also remind that most of us have multiple identities not always served by the stricter identities required by

membership in a minority group. Theorists of disability have also expressed hesitation about conceiving of people with disabilities as an identity or minority group. Lennard Davis, for example, explains that disability does not fit with the "totality of an identity," noting that "the universal sign for disability—the wheelchair—is the most profound example of the difficulty of categorizing disability because only a small minority of people with disabilities use that aid." Rosemarie Garland-Thomson believes that "identity is a little bit like nationalism"—"a very coercive category, leading to political fragmentation and division."[2] Critics of identity fear that the old identities used to repress people will come to define them in the future, or that claiming one, strong identity will excuse injustices against people not in that identity group. Neither is a small concern given the history linking identity and oppression.

The attack on identity by social constructionists is designed to liberate individuals constrained by unjust stereotypes and social prejudices. The example of disability in particular reveals with great vividness the unjust stereotypes imposed on identity by cultural norms and languages as well as the violence exercised by them. It also provides compelling evidence for the veracity of the social model. Deafness was not, for instance, a disability on Martha's Vineyard for most of the eighteenth century because 1 in 25 residents was deaf and everyone in the community knew how to sign. Deaf villagers had the same occupations and incomes as people who could hear.[3] This example shows to what extent disability is socially produced. In fact, it is tempting to see disability exclusively as the product of a bad match between society and some human bodies because it is so often the case. But disability also frustrates theorists of social construction because the disabled body and mind are not easily aligned with cultural norms and codes. Many disability scholars have begun to insist that the social model either fails to account for the difficult physical realities faced by people with disabilities or presents their body and mind in ways that are conventional, conformist, and unrecognizable to them. These include the habits of privileging pleasure over pain, making work a condition of independence, favoring performativity to corporeality, and describing social success in terms of intellectual achievement, bodily adaptability, and active political participation.

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have noticed that the push to link physical difference to cultural and social constructs, especially ideological ones, has actually made disability disappear from the social model. They cite a variety of recent studies of the body that use "corporeal aberrancies" to emblematize social differences, complaining that "physical difference" within common critical methodologies "exemplifies the evidence of social deviance even as the constructed nature of *physicality itself* fades from view."[4] As Davis puts it, cultural theory abounds with "the fluids of sexuality, the gloss of lubrication, the glossary of the body as text, the heteroglossia of the intertext, the glossolalia of the schizophrenic. But almost never the body of the differently abled."[5]

Recent theoretical emphases on "performativity," "heterogeneity," and "indeterminacy" privilege a disembodied ideal of freedom, suggesting that

emancipation from social codes and norms may be achieved by imagining the body as a subversive text. These emphases are not only incompatible with the experiences of people with disabilities; they mimic the fantasy, often found in the medical model, that disease and disability are immaterial as long as the imagination is free. Doctors and medical professionals have the habit of coaxing sick people to cure themselves by thinking positive thoughts, and when an individual's health does not improve, the failure is ascribed to mental weakness. Sontag was perhaps the first to understand the debilitating effect of describing illness as a defect of imagination or will power. She traces the notion that disease springs from individual mental weakness to Schopenhauer's claim that "recovery from a disease depends on the will assuming 'dictatorial power in order to subsume the rebellious forces' of the body" (43–44). She also heaps scorn on the idea that the disabled or sick are responsible for their disease, concluding that "theories that diseases are caused by mental states and can be cured by will power are always an index of how much is not understood about the physical terrain of a disease" (55). The rebellious forces of the body and the physical nature of disease represent a reality untouched by metaphor, Sontag insists, and "that reality has to be explained" (55).

Consider as one example of the problems of the social model Judith Butler's writings on power. I choose the example deliberately because her work represents an extraordinarily nuanced version of social construction, offering a good idea of both its strengths and weaknesses on the subject of disability. A curious thing about Butler's work is that bodies, disabled or otherwise, rarely appear in it. This includes *Bodies That Matter*—a book that seems at first glance to describe how oppressed people are constrained to think about their bodies as deviant but that actually takes as its topic the relation between guilt and subject formation.[6] For Butler, psychic pain and guilt are the preconditions of subjectivity. Power puts the subject in place via a process of subjection that constitutes the materiality of the self. Subjection, however, is a psychological process rather than a physical or material one—a conclusion made apparent by the fact that Butler reserves the defining use of "materiality" for the "materiality of the signifier" (30). Guilt not only regulates the body, Butler insists, it projects specific morphologies of the body. Consequently, political emancipation requires a revolutionary change in the mental state of the subjected person—a throwing off of every feeling prosaically referred to as guilt—but a change extremely difficult to achieve because guilt is anchored by an apparatus of social power well beyond the ken of the individual. Indeed, guilt predates the formation of subjectivity, for the subject comes into being only as the self-inscription of guilt on the body. Guilt is a regulatory idea that saturates the surface of the body and appears as physical illness (64).

It is to Butler's credit that she is able to read so clearly what might be called the tendency in the philosophy of mind to represent the body only in terms of its encasement of the mind. In fact, another book, *The Psychic Life of Power* (PLP), seems designed to apply her ideas about bodily subjection to

the philosophy of mind, where she demonstrates with considerable skill the long tradition of philosophical misunderstanding of corporeality. What is not obvious, however, is whether she offers an alternative to this tradition because her main concern remains the *psychic* life of power. Butler's work refers most often to the mental pain created by power, almost always referenced as guilt, and the ways that power subjects the body to fit its ends. But if power changes the body to serve its perverse agenda, changing the body may also be an option for those in search of a way to resist power. It is a matter, then, of finding a way to imagine one's body differently. This last point bears repeating with an emphasis: to resist power, one imagines one's body differently, but one does not imagine a different body, for example, a disabled body.[7]

The body supporting Butler's theories is an able body whose condition relies on its psychological powers, and therefore the solution to pain or disability is also psychological. The able or healthy body is, first, a body that the subject cannot feel. The healthy subject is either disinterested in its body or in control of its feelings and sensations. Second, the health of a body is judged by the ability not only to surmount pain, illness, and disability but also to translate by force of will their effects into benefits. It seems, to use the Foucauldian vocabulary favored by Butler, that the body is "docile" only because the mind is docile to begin with, for her heady analyses intimate that the only way to save the body is by awakening the brain. It is almost as if the body is irrelevant to the subject's political life. The physical condition of the body is not a factor in political repression; only the inability of the mind to resist subjugation ultimately matters.

Physicality is part of the reality of the disabled body, and if the physical state contributes to the experience of people with disabilities, then its misrepresentation as a mental condition will have a detrimental effect on their ability to organize themselves politically.[8] The tendency of the social model to refer physical states to mental ones, then, especially to those that privilege acts of the imagination, is a political act, and hardly a neutral one, because it often represents impairment as the product of mental weakness. There may be no more damning political gesture. Many are the obstacles placed before people with physical disabilities who want to participate fully as citizens in political process, but the majority of nondisabled people does not dispute that the disabled should have rights of citizenship. This belief does not extend to people with mental disabilities. The "feeble-minded" hold rights of citizenship nowhere, and few people in the mainstream believe this fact should be changed. Behind the idea that physical disability may be cured by acts of will or the imagination is a model of political rationality that oppresses people with mental disabilities. I turn to the problem of rationality and political representation in the second half of this essay, but two ideas are worth stressing immediately. First, if the social model relies for its persuasive power on a shift from physical to mental disability, its claim to locate disability in the social environment rather than in the disabled person is less complete than it pretends, since the concept of individual defect returns to haunt its

conclusions. Second, that one fails to throw off one's physical disability because of mental defect implies a caste system that ranks people with physical disabilities as superior to those with mental ones. This caste system, of course, encourages the vicious treatment of people with mental disabilities in most societies. Its influence is fully apparent in models of political citizenship, the history of civil and human rights, structures of legal practice, the politics of institutionalization, employment history, and the organization of the disability community itself.

A final point about the psychology of social construction and its inability to respond to the identity politics of people with disabilities. Social construction, despite its preoccupation with political ideology, clings resolutely to a psychological model based on the autonomy of the individual rather than developing one designed to address political community. It seems to agree with liberal individualism that emancipation from repression relies on the intellectual and emotional resources of the individual and not on political action by people working in groups. This is nowhere more apparent than in its objection to identity politics. Wendy Brown, for example, argues that identity politics becomes "invested in its own subjection," feasts on "political impotence," and descends into a melancholy based on a "narcissistic wound." She claims that identity politics is essentially a politics of resentment but defines resentment by applying Nietzsche's comments about an individual character, "the man of resentment," to political formation, as if the psychology of many people and a single mind were interchangeable.[9] Likewise, Butler comes to the conclusion that identity tied to injury—her formulation for identity politics—has little chance of freeing itself from oppression because once one is "called by an injurious name," "a certain narcissism takes hold of any term that confers existence, I am led to embrace the terms that injure me because they constitute me socially" (*PLP* 104). In fact, the only chance of resisting oppression, she continues, occurs when the "attachment to an injurious interpellation," "by way of a necessarily alienated narcissism," supports "the condition by which resignifying that interpellation becomes possible" (*PLP* 104). It is revealing that Butler cannot critique identity politics without breaking into the first-person singular. Moreover, she hinges every form of political resistance and attachment on "narcissism"—an accusatory category with a long history of application to people with disabilities.[10] Both gestures demonstrate her dependence on individual psychology—a dependence she shares with Brown and many other social constructionists.

What would it mean to imagine a model of political identity that does not rely on individual psychology—one that sees political psychology as greater than the sum of its parts? What would it mean to define political identity based not on self-interest or disinterest but on common interests? Finally, what would it mean to define physicality politically—not as the individual body supporting the political will or imagination but as a body beyond the individual? This body would be politically repressive because its form would be imprinted on the social and built environment, determining the exclusion of some people and the inclusion of others. But this body would also be