RE-SITUATING
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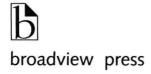
CULTURE

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ITED BY VERED AMIT-TALAI AND CAROLINE KNOWLES

RE-SITUATING IDENTITIES

Re-Situating Identities:

The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Culture

Vered Amit-Talai & Caroline Knowles

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Introduction: Against Parochialism and Fragmentation

Vered Amit-Talai and Caroline Knowles

Like its subjects, the study of race and ethnicity has combined an enthusiasm for invention and border crossings with an equally determined parochialism. For nearly three decades, anthropologists and sociologists have stressed the socially constructed and situationally contingent nature of racial and ethnic distinctions. With the end of the Cold War, more people moving than ever before, and the relentless innovation of communication technologies, the boundaries and identities of local political units appear increasingly uncertain. Indeed in the ensuing scholarly celebration of border zones, the Local sometimes seems in danger of a premature epistemological oblivion: people may still be living there but academics, and graduate students in particular, appear to have decamped to the Superhighway. In this de-anchored, hybrid and moving world, the ethnic Diaspora has taken on a new relevance, as a kind of metaphor for the late-twentieth-century human condition, writ large.

Associated with this effort to grapple with the displacements and uncertainties of the *fin de siècle* has been the argument for a shift in analytical levels away from the study of local ethnic and racial groupings to the study of the organization of diversity (Sanjek 1994:10). Hence the focus here tends to be on the impact of state formation (Williams 1989), the relationship between ethnicity and other forms of differentiation (Verdery 1994), racism as a global system (Sanjek 1994), repeat migration (Al-

varez 1987), transnationalism (Hannerz 1992) and the margins or borders of state systems (Bhaba 1990; Rosaldo 1989).

Yet pick up one of the mountain of readers on race and ethnic relations in Canada or the United States, flip to its table of contents, and in most cases you are likely to find the very categories we were supposed to have left behind. In the United States, these will probably include Asian, Hispanic, Native and African Americans and perhaps in some cases references to white ethnic categories. In Canada a somewhat longer list of similar categories is carefully balanced with attention to official language distinctions and regional representativeness. This, we contend, is not an accidental parochialism born out of a lag between current research and the simplifications of undergraduate textbooks. It is a self-conscious and in some ways accurate depiction of academic territorial claims. Textbook inventories may not tell us very much about the social organization of ethnicity or the impact of racism but they do delineate the proliferation of ethnic studies chairs, native studies programs, and Hispanic or African American institutes. They reflect the organization of curriculum, hiring committees, university task forces, and mission statements. In short, these books sell, and they sell because they accurately read the institutional landscape of their principal patrons.

That landscape is increasingly being reshaped by identity politics that draw upon a conceptual convergence between cultural studies, multiculturalism, and political correctness. The conservatism engendered by this convergence is painfully ironic given the initial political and critical aspirations of cultural studies, which emerged as a transatlantic, multidisciplinary critique of representation. Drawing heavily on postmodernist and poststructuralist work in Britain, France, and more recently in North America, cultural studies was profoundly sceptical of traditional hierarchies of knowledge, power, and culture, hierarchies which privileged materialism over rhetorical forms, the market and society over everyday forms of life, and high versus popular culture. The politics associated with that critical challenge was conceived as egalitarian, levelling, and intellectually liberating; liberated from the constraints of a spurious base/superstructure, truth/representation polarity, the political imagination was now capable of conceiving radically new forms of social life (Ryan 1988).

Michael Ryan was based in an American university when he wrote this optimistic portrait of postmodern politics, but in the transatlantic passage from its British roots to an American efflorescence, the sense of

political engagement which had originally inspired cultural studies diminished. Cultural studies "moved increasingly from the study of social action to the study of texts" (Knauft 1994:133). As Knauft continues, in British and even more so in American cultural studies,

> Concepts such as "hegemony", "resistance", "articulation", "war of position" and the "organic" nature of popular culture are too sweepingly and uncritically used and are only lightly underpinned by substantive social analysis.

And one can see the attraction of this textual preoccupation. At a time when intellectuals seem increasingly irrelevant to and powerless in the face of a global shift to the right, when a brutal economic reductionism has become enshrined in a sacred cult of deficit reduction, it's harder than ever to launch a politically engaged critique of representational icons. How comforting it is to feel that resistance can still be achieved through a hermeneutics that rarely requires straying from the university library or the television set or that the production of texts can stand in for effective political changes. In short, the struggle against "discursive hegemonies" has become a sardonic guide to 1990s radicalism. Let us be blunt. This is not only lazy radicalism; it is a politically emasculated intellectualism.

It is this postmodern husk, a ritual invocation of analytical terms reduced to slogans, which has bled into the academic politics of identity. It is a politics which attaches a pretentious importance to curricular reform, bland mission statements, and an obsessional preoccupation with naming. If former left-wing activists have indeed captured academe as critics like Richard Bernstein (1994) contend (although unfortunately we see little evidence of this), they're not manning the barricades, they're manning university program committees. This is not a right-wing nightmare; it's a reactionary's dream of co-optation come true. Sadly, it is not only Baudrillard who has ended up in "agentless apathy on the right" (Knauft 1994:131). Far too many of us have joined him. Academics may be trying to launch themselves onto a global landscape but their politics are becoming painfully localized to the academic bureaucracy.

These are not novel insights but they suggest a few twists and implications worth noting. The first is that while the accounts produced by academic identity politics distort the distribution and experience of ra-

cial and ethnic distinctions, this is not an innocent or unaware distortion. It is a politically astute calculation of opportunities and tactics within the academic infrastructure and must be countered as such. Second this form of deliberate parochialism is associated with a bureaucratic and disciplinary balkanization. We have long been aware that disciplinary boundaries, rigorously maintained, may soothe occupational insecurities and aid managerial control but do little to stimulate the development of sophisticated theoretical paradigms. Similarly, reproducing ethnic categories and groups as the product or object of study of a proliferation of academic programs, "experts" and owners may protect old and establish new occupational enclaves, but they have a theoretical "wheel-spinning" effect.

Curiously, some of those who have emphasized the emergent, invented character of ethnic or racial categories have also insisted on this kind of fragmentation. For Roger Sanjek, twenty-five years of anthropological writing on ethnic and social boundaries, on the organization of difference and the political construction of identity, have little contribution to make to the study of race and racism, which he construes as somehow entirely separate (1994:10). In Canada, this kind of attitude has meant a persistent lag between ethnic studies and theoretical developments in the social sciences and humanities. as Li (1990) has noted, far too many Canadian studies of ethnicity and race are still obsessively preoccupied with theories of assimilation and pluralism which were current in the 1960s and earlier. Other Canadian studies (Satzewich 1992) have become stuck in an equally outmoded Marxist groove which restricts their coverage to the significance of labour markets and what is often referred to as "institutional racism" in which race and ethnicity are grafted onto the more significant category of class. Still other studies are concerned with racism at the level of popular "attitudes" revealed in surveys (Henry *et al.* 1995). These have long ceased to be major concerns in recent cross-disciplinary efforts to rethink culture, identity, and structure.

In Britain, local investigations into the mobilization of racial and ethnic markers and belonging in local politics (Ball and Solomos 1990; Eade 1992), biography and boundary (Feuchtwang 1992), black phenomenology (Cambridge 1992), the racialization of social relationships (Miles 1989), urbanization as racialized space (Cross and Keith 1993) have generated a climate of interrogation and contestation around the race concept and its relationship to racism. The result is that British race sociology has developed a substantial theoretical literature where race and

ethnicity are the object of continual scrutiny rather than taken as a "given" upon which the fragmentation of the field can be construed.

It is precisely this attention to theory and the importance placed on the analysis – if not always the political resolution – of racism as a set of concrete practices which delayed the fragmentation of British race sociology. Whatever the debates about the nature of race and racial exclusion, there was a broad consensus around the maintenance of the category "black" for social and political analysis. The insistence that "blackness" was necessary for political mobilization around anti-racist struggles survived the onslaught of African American and Black British feminists and the local mobilization of activists around identity and cultural politics. Fragmentation around identity politics and cultural expression really only made its way into mainstream (white-dominated) British race sociology in the late 1980s. Hall's (1992) "new" (fragmented) ethnicities for "old" may produce more authentic forms of representation of multiple black identities, but the advantages of this in tackling the social inequalities organized by race and ethnicity are not apparent. Hall's interjection signals a convergence between the British and the American literature. In the ensuing cultural celebration of difference, the fact that neither offers a mode of political engagement in anti-racist politics has been overlooked.

The debates of British race sociology highlight a key, indeed *the* key, dilemma of a politically engaged social analysis. How do we develop analytical categories that are intrinsically comparative and sufficiently comprehensive to address national, regional, and increasingly global trends? How do we contribute to the formation of constituencies inclusive enough to mount effective political challenges and enact social change? And how do we do this without undermining recognition of the particularity of local collective identities and while respecting the complexity and agency invested in selfhood (Cohen 1985, 1994)? In short, how do we move beyond the specific theoretical and ethnographic case without resorting to structural or cultural determinism and without treating human beings as if they are categorical signifiers rather than self-aware subjects?

This is surely not a new set of questions and certainly not one that has been restricted to British sociology or the study of race and ethnicity. It is, and in a sense has always been, the $64,000 question for the social sciences and humanities, continuously addressed and re-addressed under a variety of rubrics: macro/micro; global/local; critiques of grand narra-

tives; appeals to cultural agency. The most significant contribution of postmodernism has been a revitalization of this central conundrum, a refreshed warning about the configuring power of representation and the dangers of naive renderings of "realism." But all too often, postmodernist analyses have appeared overwhelmed by the very challenges they pose. The ensuing postmodernist declarations about the "Death of the Subject," the exaggerated opposition between local stories and global histories (Benhabib 1992) and the exultation in fragmentation, have resulted in a dangerous political fatalism.

If we celebrate fragmentation as not only insurmountable but ethically virtuous, how can intellectuals speak to each other across the specificity of their research projects, across disciplines and countries? If we give in to the seduction of local incommensurabilities, then we negate our capacity and accountability as political agents and doom any possibility of new alliances. We are therefore arguing for a re-energized research project, one that resituates the production of identities in the systematic investigation of power relations, that pays heed to discursive hegemonies but not at the expense of rigorous, empirically grounded analysis and an insistence on concrete social change. If the study of race and ethnicity is to keep conceptual pace with the political and cultural developments of the late twentieth century, it must be able to mine but also to extend the reflexiveness and conceptual rethinking that have characterized the last few decades in sociology and anthropology as well as their sister disciplines. This is not to suggest, however, that once we have moved beyond the more glaring reifications of textbook ethnic catalogues, we have necessarily escaped their conflation of categories, groups, and individuals.

It is therefore not as redundant as we might have hoped to state the following obvious points. States are not political actors. Ethnic and racial groups are not political actors. Ethnic and racial categories are not political actors. People are political actors who produce, mediate, contest, and experience the outcomes of racial and ethnic distinctions. If we are going to have any hope of demystifying concepts as complex as race, ethnicity, and identity, then we need both to diversify and to resolutely populate the scenarios we examine. In the following chapters you will therefore encounter psychiatrists, explorers, minority lobbyists, singers, reporters, elected and appointed office holders, community organizers, theologians, historians, teachers, wedding service providers, and more. They operate in a multiplicity of political contexts including classrooms

and courtrooms, Diaspora bases, a college lecture, intentional community, state memorials, historical discovery, media representations, and consultation exercises. The ensuing considerations of power and control are redolent of irony and contradiction. A teacher decides to make a stand against years of painful racial harassment, sacrifices his health, job, and peace of mind, but wins a Quebec Human Rights Commission ruling (Knowles, Ch.2). In the face of committed protest, a memorial to the extinguished pre-World War II Frankfurt Jewish community is eventually incorporated into the construction of a local utilities company branch. Meanwhile in other quarters, the Nazi past is being buried in a recasting of German history as the ascendant triumph of a reunited nation (Lustiger-Thaler, Ch.8).

Political impetuses, the following chapters illustrate, can come from a wide range of state, institutional, local, and transnational sources; like academic representations, their repercussions are more likely to be uneven and inconsistent than comprehensive and coherent. Thus official multicultural policies in Canada have encouraged the emergence of a small, select occupational network of professional activists but their impact on mass ethnic mobilization is far more nebulous (Amit-Talai, Ch. 4). The problem for nationalism, Anthony Cohen argues (Ch.11), is that to be compelling it must be mediated by the very local experiences it is attempting to supersede. Politicians, he suggests, overestimate their abilities to resolve this fundamental contradiction. What after all does the Local mean, and what influence does the nation-state have on its production when you are an Asian woman with a migration history that includes Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America (Bhachu, Ch.12)?

The authors of the twelve chapters in this book are sociologists, anthropologists, and cultural theorists situated in Canada, Britain, and the United States, and with one exception they report on or review research in these locales. Most, however, have studied, worked, and conducted research in two or sometimes all three of these countries. Our aim in framing the collection in these terms is to provide an opportunity not only for examples of varied ethnographic settings but for a cross-sampling of the theoretical, historical, and political debates occurring in these countries. We make no claim nor do we aspire to be exhaustive; in twelve chapters, we cannot hope to cover the complexity of issues, settings and actors which can and should be subsumed within this field. The essays in this book, therefore, don't summarize the study of race,

ethnicity and identity. Instead, and more significantly, they expand it through expositions that are conceptually and politically provocative.

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