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CULTURAL POLITICS OF IDENTITY IN LATIN AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

The phrase “identity politics” has come to encapsulate a wide diversity of oppositional movements in contemporary Latin America, marking a transition away from the previous moment of unified, “national-popular” projects. This review takes a dual approach to the literature emerging from that transition, focusing on changes in both the objects of study and the analysts’ lens. Four questions drive this inquiry: When did the moment of identity politics arise? What accounts for the shift? How to characterize its contents? What consequences follow for the people involved? Past answers to such questions often have tended to fall into polarized materialist and discursive theoretical camps. In contrast, this review emphasizes emergent scholarship that takes insights from both while refusing the dichotomy, and assigning renewed importance to empirically grounded and politically engaged research.

INTRODUCTION

A prospective graduate student recently visited me and provided an account of her past academic odyssey, which led her finally to opt for anthropology at Texas. All her prior work had culminated, she explained, in a plan to return home (a Latin American country) to study the politics of identity. She is far from alone. The phrase “identity politics” now figures prominently in anthropology graduate school applications and graduate seminars everywhere, as well as in many journals related to anthropology that have been founded in the past decade (Identities, Social Identities, Cultural Studies of Latin America, Journal of Latin American Anthropology, Cultural Studies Birmingham).
Even more telling is the shift that has occurred in some long-running journals, whose focus previously fit neatly within the antecedent moment of Marxist analysis, class politics, and national-popular visions of social change (e.g. Socialist Review, NACLA, Nueva Sociedad). Far from limited to academia, the issues at stake also animate spirited debate in the mass media, and in politics and policy, throughout the Americas.¹

This review offers a framework to organize and think through the outpouring of work on identity politics, with a specific emphasis on Latin America. The phrase “identity politics” will refer to collective sensibilities and actions that come from a particular location within society, in direct defiance of universal categories that tend to subsume, erase, or suppress this particularity. “Location,” in this sense, implies a distinctive social memory, consciousness, and practice, as well as place within the social structure.² To illustrate, consider a group of Nicaraguan women labor organizers who worked during the 1980s within the Sandinista Workers Union (CST). By the decade’s end, these organizers had become fed up with CST’s universal category “class,” which allowed little room for specific attention to women’s experiences as workers, and even less for critique of patriarchy. When they left the CST to form a separate organization devoted to the particular experiences, interests, and struggles of women workers, they entered the realm of identity politics (Criquillón 1995).

The review proceeds in four parts. I begin by asking when identity politics achieved prominence in Latin America and in Latin Americanist anthropology. Is it possible to specify a moment of “rupture” after which identity politics came to the fore? Next I ask how analysts account for this shift. Given the heterogeneity of the subject, is it more appropriate to pursue a series of wholly distinct explanations, rather than a single one? I then examine the character of identity politics: Does the phrase refer to a collection of practices and sensibilities that have key features in common? This will lead, finally, to a consideration of outcomes and consequences: What have people achieved through the

¹This topic is entirely too extensive even to begin to cite. For a cogent recent commentary that relates public debate in the United States specifically to anthropology, see di Leonardo (1996). In this essay, she makes the interesting point that in the mainstream public eye, “identity politics” is imbued with both a “constructivist” (i.e. all histories are situated, relative truths) and “essentialist” (i.e. our history is the right one) contents, without addressing the substantial disparities between these two discourses. I take up this issue in what follows.

²This formulation is influenced by readings in the new cultural geography, the impetus for which came from Donald Moore. The literature that relates space and identity politics in this way is extensive; works that I found especially useful include Moore (1997), Massey (1994), Pile & Thrift (1995), and Gupta & Ferguson (1992).
practice of identity politics, with what impact on their lives? Rather than provide definitive answers to these questions, I frame the discussions they have generated, specify key divergences and areas of consensus, and chart the promising directions in which new research is headed. Throughout, I tack back and forth between the topic itself and the assumptions underlying anthropological analysis, drawing inspiration from others who have engaged in such critique (Coronil 1996, Kearney 1996, Taussig 1993, Williams 1989, Yúdice 1996, CA Smith 1997). By making intellectuals the objects of study as well, we keep the politics of anthropological theory on center stage and take fuller advantage of the “dual or multiple consciousness” that results (Harrison 1991).

Justifiable and enlightening for nearly any body of literature, emphasis on the entanglement of the analyst’s lens and topic of study is especially crucial in this case. On the one hand, the massive and widespread evidence for a shift in the character of oppositional politics in Latin America—the “explosion” of grassroots organizations (Castañeda 1993), the rise of “new social movements” (Escobar & Alvarez 1992)—is impossible to miss. Emblematic of this shift is the surge of political activity by indigenous peoples throughout the hemisphere on the occasion of the Columbus quincentenary (Gabriel 1994, Hale 1994a, SAIIC 1992): their newly acquired national-level political influence, and their leaders’ adamanty to speak for themselves. On the other hand, much writing on the topic invites skepticism. For example, Arturo Escobar (1992a, p. 82) recently wrote with annunciatory enthusiasm of new social movements, asserting that:

up to the 1960s, identities were, in a sense, clearly defined and unproblematic. One knew who was who, so to speak, and how he or she was defined as a member of a group. One also knew what to do and how to do it (Development or Revolution, depending on one’s perspective). But this is no longer true.

Assertions like this one cry out for hard-nosed historical and theoretical critique (e.g. Edelman 1996, Knight 1990). Such a neat before-after dichotomy, if relevant at all, could only reasonably apply to intellectuals well versed in paradigm hopping. When applied across the board, it leaves the distinct impression that the two realms—how people enact politics and how analysts understand these enactments—have been seriously conflated. Even more to the point are efforts to read complex social and political processes through a few purportedly emblematic literary texts, which yield predictable portrayals of Latin American societies saturated with hybridity, multiplicity, and other so-called keywords of the shift to identity politics (e.g. de la Campa 1995). Such claims culminate in the idea that Latin America has always been hybrid (e.g. Chanady 1994), an assertion that, in its very incontestability, reinforces the suspicion that changing theoretical fashions play a major role in constituting their own subject.
Yet many such critiques, instead of restoring analytical balance, often have left the debate hopelessly polarized. One need only sample the venom in the "forum" on Ahmad’s (1992) work in Public Culture (Ahmad 1993), or reflect on the implications of Dirlik’s (1994) provocative assertion that postcolonial theory came of age when third world intellectuals “arrived in First World academe,” creating an “aura” that obscured the facilitating conditions of their arrival: i.e. class privilege and the “needs” of global capitalism (see also Lazarus 1991). When these critics attempt to reduce all analysis informed by postmodern theory to self-absorbed ruminations and self-interested career moves, the argument rapidly takes on an “aura” of its own. Framed as a return to “materiality,” these counterarguments often allow the real subject of analysis—people struggling from the margins to gain voice and power—to vanish into thin air.

My point of departure here is that this polarized divide—between postmodern theoretical innovation and materialist reassertion—has grown steadily less important, and less useful, as an organizing framework for recent scholarship on identity politics in Latin America. It would not be difficult to find work that exemplifies those entrenched, opposing poles: identities as performative acts, politics as purely discursive battles versus hard-bitten calls for a return to the fundamental role of class struggle in history; blanket assertions of a rupture that relegates all theory “before” to the status of “totalizing Eurocentric metanarrative” versus suspiciously totalizing efforts to cast the new theory as unwitting ideological accomplice of “global capitalism.” Indeed, I refer to this polarization throughout the review because it is integral to the recent intellectual history of the topic. Yet I also recast this polarization as precisely that—historical background—for two reasons. First, the flaws inherent in each pole of the debate have become mutually enabling: They are propelled more by contention with one another than by sustained empirical engagement with the subject of study. Second, most of the interesting, forward-looking research already has set its sights squarely beyond this divide, incorporating insights from both sides while rejecting the extreme terms of the polarization itself. Although one might be tempted to understand the resulting theoretical resting place as a middle ground, a synthesis of the materialist thesis and the discursive antithesis, I contend that a more radical departure is under way. The most promising work not only offers new theories of politics but sets out to explore and implement a new politics of theory (Hall 1992): skeptical of both positivist theory-building and trendy, wheel-spinning theoretical self-referentiality; methodologically rigorous, yet fully aware that all claims to objectivity are ultimately situated knowledges (Haraway 1988); and most important, oriented toward reflexive political engagement, whether focused on “subalterns” who speak, read, and write for themselves, or on powerful institutions and actors who too often in the past have avoided anthropological scrutiny.
WHEN DID THE TURN TO IDENTITY POLITICS BEGIN?

Just as some recently have protested that anthropologists were “multiculturalists” long before the term became a lightning rod for US cultural politics (e.g. Weiner 1992), one might well claim that anthropology of Latin America was “on to” identity politics long before the phrase rose to its current heights of theoretical fashion. Consider, for example, two traditional areas of concentration in Latin American anthropology—peasants and indigenous peoples. If we juxtapose these two key features associated with identity politics—local identities shaped by global forces (Appadurai 1995), and politics as “struggles over [cultural] meanings at the level of daily life” (Escobar 1992a, p. 71; Franco 1992)—continuities come immediately to mind. At least forty years ago scholars began to place the analysis of the Latin American peasantry in a global context (Adams 1967, Mintz 1974, Wolf 1969), and sensitivity to struggles over cultural meanings (at least at the local level) in indigenous societies goes back even further. Michael Brown has made this latter point recently, and all the more forcefully because his work on Amazonian Indian leaders highlights the “new politics of identity” in which they are immersed. Yet he concludes with a call for return to the fine-grained political ethnographies of times past, which addressed questions like: “In what ways is power created, used, negotiated, and thwarted by individuals in their daily lives?” (Brown 1993, p. 320; see also Watanabe 1996). Assuming that Brown is not using hindsight to artificially resuscitate the old masters, then the similarity between his and Escobar’s descriptions is striking: What precisely justifies the adjective “new”?

Part of the answer lies in the process of rearticulation, whereby people find new means to collectively express and pursue interests, demands, and values that have long-standing importance to them. This implied emphasis on continuity must strike a delicate balance: neither imbuing people with timeless, essential motivations, nor assuming that these motivations come into being only when an organized effort first emerges to express them. In the case of indigenous politics, for example, we can acknowledge the diverse forms of resistance throughout the past 500 years and note that key issues of Indian identity addressed in the sixteenth century are still pertinent today (Silverblatt 1995). Yet we can also note that indigenous peoples now increasingly advance their struggles through a discourse that links Indian identity with rights to territory, autonomy, and peoplehood—rights that run parallel to those of the nation state itself (Albó 1991, Bonfil Batalla 1981, Conklin & Graham 1995, Jackson 1995, Sherzer & Urban 1991, Stavenhagen 1992).

A systematic analysis of rearticulation must begin with closer scrutiny of the term “identity.” On my office wall hangs a poster, distributed by an organization of Maya cultural activism in Guatemala, whose slogan reads: “Only
when a people (un Pueblo) learns (acepta) its history and affirms (asume) its identity, does it have the right to define its future.” This statement encapsulates a notion of identity as unique and differentiated (possessing its own historical ontology) and inherently endowed with fundamental rights (beginning with self-determination). We might want to think about the era of “identity politics” as beginning when this particular use of the term identity became the standard, generalized idiom through which groups engage in politics with one another, the state, and other powerful adversaries (Handler 1994, Rouse 1995a). Ernesto Laclau’s (1977) now classic essay on populism helps to evoke and describe the previous state of affairs, when the forging of a “national-popular” bloc could theoretically reconcile the great heterogeneity of Latin American societies with the need for political unity. A national-popular bloc could encompass the whole gamut of “popular” sectors, while drawing political direction and coherence from a strong class-conscious leadership. Even socialism, Laclau argued, could only succeed if grounded in a convincing discourse of lo popular.

This vision of national-popular political transformation has been prominent in the sensibilities and strategy of twentieth-century politics in Latin America, especially in oppositional politics, through (to choose the latest possible endpoint) the Sandinista electoral defeat of 1990 (Castañeda 1993, Rowe & Schelling 1991). The national-popular vision also played a key role in keeping oppositional politics within the flow of history with a “big h”: a narrative that connected Latin America with Western liberal notions of economic development, membership in the community of sovereign nations, and societal modernization (albeit on a path critical of capitalist exploitation and imperialism). Equally important, it empowered intellectuals to perform the crucial role of mediator: to articulate the heterogeneity of lo popular with the homogeneous discourse of the national-popular. The fit with Sandinista intellectuals’ portrayals of their revolution, for example, could hardly be better (Burbach & Nuñez 1987, Nuñez Soto 1986).

3 There is a related story of intellectual genealogy to be told on the emergence of “ethnicity” and its displacement of anthropology’s previous term of preference, “tribe.” A glance at the literature in the early 1960s reveals a striking absence of the term “ethnicity.” Over the next two decades, it became ubiquitous. In the 1990s, “ethnicity” is clearly in decline, replaced on the one hand by various uses of the term “identity” and on the other by a renaissance of interest in racism, racialization, and racial identities. For a critical analysis of the “erasure” of race from anthropology’s lexicon, see Harrison (1995). Examples of the renaissance include the work of Marta Casaús Arzú (1991) and Marisol de la Cadena (1996), and the essays by Carol A Smith (1997) and Demetrio Cojí (1997), forthcoming in Identidades y Racismo en Guatemala, a volume I am co-editing with Clara Arenas and Gustavo Palma of AVANCSO.
When the multiple subjects within the national-popular bloc claim their own separate rights, histories, and identities, however, this formula begins to unravel. Erosion of the national-popular project, and the crisis of intellectuals as mediators of its vision, may be the most reliable sign that identity politics have come to the fore. This implies not a stark rupture—a “before” when multiple identities fit neatly into broader categories, and an “after” when they did not; nor does it imply a uniform temporal logic, as in Wallerstein’s (1995, pp. 1173, 1176) argument that the rise of identity politics can be linked to the “annunciatory and denunciatory world revolution of 1968,” which starkly revealed the “total” contradiction of a world system. If we are to understand the emergence of multiple identities, then it hardly makes sense to reinscribe them within a framework in which particularity is derivative of universal, systemic forces and contradictions. The alternative logic of multiple historicities is what leads Fernando Coronil (1996) to refer to new social movements as the “spacialization of time”—that is, the claim to history emerging from a particular social location and adherence to the particular cultural political vision that follows.

Debates over the shift away from the national-popular are especially revealing in the case of the rebellion in Chiapas, which burst into the public eye in January 1994 (Nugent 1995). Should it be understood as “primarily a peasant rebellion” in response to the “politics of exclusion” brought about by the broader forces of Mexico’s authoritarian regime and global economic dislocation (Collier 1994, 1995)? If so, then what role does the distinctively indigenous identity of the participants have in shaping their decision to rebel, their organization, their political objectives? Does the rebellion fit neatly within the long history of oppositional politics, directed toward capturing the aspirations of the “Mexican people” toward a newly conceived, truly democratic and representative “proyecto nacional” (García de León 1996, Valenzuela Jose 1996)? Or does it constitute a radical break with that very tradition, offering a new model for “doing politics,” a movement bent more on transforming civil society than on traditional political goals like “nation building” and “taking power”? (Burbach 1994). If the latter, what are we to make of the quintessential national-popular rhetoric evident in so many Zapatista political statements, starting with the “Declaration of War” (1/1/94), which begins:

[T]oday we say ENOUGH IS ENOUGH. We are the inheritors of the true builders of our nation....We will not die of hunger due to the insatiable ambition of a...clique of traitors...the same ones that opposed Hidalgo and Morelos, the same ones that massacred the railroad workers in 1958 and the students in 1968....

Rather than choose between these two interpretations, we might read the ubiquitous national-popular rhetoric as another indication that the shift to identity
politics has been consummated. So complete is the erosion of the national-
popular that it can now stage a modest return, no longer as all-encompassing
political project but as another decentered, rejuvenating (though perhaps de-
bilitated?) voice from the margins.

WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR THE SHIFT?

Any reader who has dipped even superficially into the literature on the politics
of identity in Latin America will have its descriptive features well enough in
mind (e.g. Mato 1994). The move from descriptive listing to explanatory
analysis of the transition is much less commonly found. Collier et al (1995)
provide one piece of the puzzle, in an argument that focuses on the contradic-
tions of liberal ideology more generally (e.g. Kristeva 1993, Rouse 1995a).
They point to an inherent contradiction between the universal principle of
equality and the persisting marginalization of those who do not fit within the
universal categories through which equality is achieved (e.g. “citizen” or “ab-
stract individual”). This contradiction engenders political change, however,
because it creates the opportunity for marginalized groups to make claims in
the name of bourgeois law, albeit at the risk of reproducing the very cultural
logic that once oppressed them. A gradually broadening process of inclusion
results, which Collier et al point to as the cultural-juridical underpinnings for
the rise of “identity politics” in contemporary times. Yet they do not explain
why this process would have such intensity today. Similarly, Nina Glick Schil-
ler et al (1992), leading analysts of “transnationalism” and its implications for
identity politics (also the focus of the journal Identities that Glick Schiller ed-
its) conclude in a recent essay that, “The socially constructed nature of our en-
tire repository of terms to define and bound identity—“nationality,” “race,”
and “ethnicity”—has just recently begun to be scrutinized adequately by social
scientists. And the implications of transnationalism for hegemonic construc-
tions of identity have yet to be analyzed.”

Arjun Appadurai (1990, 1995), though cogent in his critique of both
“world-systems” and “comparative-historical” approaches (the former ne-
glects “disjuncture” and the latter “interconnectedness”), and creative in coin-
ing terms that evoke present conditions (ethnoscapess, memoryscapes, etc),
also finds rigorous explanation lacking. He notes that “a strong theory of
globalization, from a sociocultural point of view, is likely to require something
that we certainly do not now have: a theory of intercontextual relations which
incorporates our existing sense of intertexts” (1995, p. 212). How then to ex-
plain the shift, to avoid telling the story from the Eurocentric center (Waller-
stein 1995), while achieving a reasonably comprehensive account? How to
proceed if existing analytical tools have been rendered inadequate for the job?
Fredric Jameson’s (1984, 1988) call for a “new cognitive mapping” has become a touchstone (or at least a de rigueur citation) for virtually everyone who confronts this problem, even if the resulting analyses lead in sharply contrasting directions. Jameson argues that it is wrong-headed to respond to postmodernism either with moral critique or as a cultural/theoretical option that one can embrace or reject. Instead, he takes the historical shift as a given and calls for a radically new framework to analyze “postmodern” phenomena like identity politics, combined with an insistence that the framework retain familiarly Marxist notions of causality, historical process, and, as Jameson puts it, the “social totality.” Far from a flaw or contradiction, for some this combination enables rigorous explanation of the shift. Roger Rouse (1995a,b), for example, employs a series of concepts—e.g. (im)migration circuits, transnational spaces of identity formation—that are explicitly linked to a Jameson-like notion of the postmodern logic of capitalism. Rouse argues that in the present era of “transnational” capitalism, the state and bourgeoisie have responded to political opposition by encouraging people to express discontent through the idiom of identity. The politics of identity that result are easily contained, because they rest on key premises of the bourgeois edifice that they purport to challenge and, fundamentally, because they derail much more potent forms of class-based antisystemic struggle (see also Friedlander 1976, 1986; Larsen 1995; Vilas 1994).

Another group of theorists take up Jameson’s call for a new cognitive mapping only after it is shorn of what Cornell West (rather provocatively) calls “a conception of totality” that “ultimately leads toward a Leninist or Leninist-like politics,” a “crash course” of “pessimism” and “sectarianism” (from discussion of Jameson 1988; see also West 1986). Analysis from this perspective (e.g. García Canclini 1995, Rowe & Schelling 1991) seeks an explanation for the rise of identity politics grounded in many accounts that emerge from particular social locations and historicities. As Laclau (1994, p. 1) observes “we are witnessing a proliferation of particularistic political identities, none of which tries to ground its legitimacy and its action in a mission predetermined by universal history—whether that be mission of a universal class, or the notion of a privileged race, or an abstract principle.” To the extent that Laclau does offer an inductive explanation, it is carefully framed as a matter of “social dislocation” that leaves people without a “clearly defined location in the social structure,” and feeling an “originary and insurmountable lack of identity,” which together engender a great need to construct one (1994, p. 2–3). Laclau’s recent writings illustrate what might be called a “discursivist” approach to the rise of identity politics. He does not neglect the role of capitalistic transformation in the shift (the term “social dislocation” is a reference to precisely that), but the central analytical thrust lies in the crisis and undoing of the dominant ideological frames that previously had kept identities stable, well-defined, and
beyond doubt, thereby allowing the “heterogeneity of the social” to burst forth. There is a principled refusal to explain why this discursive crisis is occurring now, because to do so would force a return to the universalist “mission” from which we have just been freed.

Yet while this theoretical polarity—between the insistence on social totality versus particularity—does help to sort out alternative explanations for the shift, its utility soon reaches a point of diminishing returns. In the first place, the closer to the ground the analysis gets, the more overlapping and mutually dependent these allegedly polarized theoretical perspectives begin to appear. Moreover, there is a common tendency at both poles to leave the consciousness and agency of actors themselves obscure, theoretically evoked rather than ethnographically examined. In this vein, we might pair Cornell West’s searing critique of Jameson’s “totalizing” analysis with Chilean Nelly Richard’s (1995, p. 221) dissent from the theoretical categories created by postmodern analysis of identity politics: “[W]omen and the Third World are categories more spoken for by postmodernity, without obliging the cultural institution to loosen its discursive monopoly over the right to speak, without ceding to them the much greater right to become autonomous subjects of enunciation...intervening (disorganizing) in the rules of discourse that determine property and pertinence (pertenencias y pertinencias).” If in part this is a question of, as Richard puts it, the “prestige of the authorized signature,” the problem also spills over into one of theoretically driven myopia. For example, it is disquieting to see how frequently Sandinista leaders are added to the list of protagonists of “postmodern identity politics,” with so little consideration of the profound conflict around precisely the features that theoretically set identity politics apart (Beverley et al. 1995, Rowe & Shelling 1991). Such assertions neglect the growing body of literature focused on tensions between the Sandinista leadership’s vision of the unified subject, on the one hand, and the multiple subjects of the revolutionary coalition—i.e. women (Criquillón 1995, Molyneux 1986, Randall 1994), indigenous peoples (Díaz-Polanco 1985, Gould 1997, Hale 1994b), Afro-Nicaraguans (Gordon 1998b), artisans (Field 1997), peasants (Bendaña 1991)—on the other.

A greater emphasis on ethnographic specificity offers no guarantee that a broader explanation for the shift will eventually emerge. Indeed, such work could risk falling back into a new version of the old parochialism that for so long kept anthropology on the sidelines of precisely these discussions. Yet if the work is theoretically informed and also ethnographically engaged, it stands to contribute most to a broader explanation for the shift. I’m thinking here of recent research on peasant organizing (Edelman 1996, Starn 1994), on indigenous politics (Campbell 1994, Field 1998, Jackson 1995, Rappaport 1994, Sawyer 1996, Varese 1995, Warren 1997), on religion-based social move-
ments in Brazil (Burick 1993), on the politics of African diasporic identities in Latin America (Gordon 1998b, Scott 1991), on the many manifestations of the women’s movements (Radcliff & Westwood 1993, Stephen 1995). This work is also distinguished—though in varying ways—by the goal of achieving a relationship of dialogue, exchange, and mutual critique with the subjects of research. Neither antitheoretical nor averse to generalization, these authors are mindful of the need to tell a story in which the protagonists might recognize themselves as such, rather than as pawns in someone else’s theory wars. While it is too early to know whether a “new cognitive mapping” of the shift will emerge from such research, in the meantime we are learning a lot more about what identity politics mean in a series of specific times and places.

**HOW CAN IDENTITY POLITICS BE CHARACTERIZED?**

The first dimension of Latin American identity politics—extrapolating from Stuart Hall’s (1988) influential essay—has as its key feature a challenge to the premise that a unified subject could “represent” (both “depict” and “speak for”)—heterogeneous identities and social processes. In the case of Latin American indigenous politics, for example, the landmark document is the “Declaration of Barbados,” the result of a meeting in 1971 in which anthropologists (mainly Latin American Mestizos) acknowledged the rise of indigenous cultural-political militancy and called for an activist anthropology in the service of “Indian liberation” (Wright 1988). The full impact of this challenge came into play with “Barbados II,” a less publicized and more tension-ridden meeting in 1979, where Indian leaders thanked anthropologists for their “solidarity” but roundly criticized them for appropriating Indian voices, for presuming to know what “Indian liberation” meant.4 The second dimension involves critique of the internal relations of difference within any given form of political initiative, the effort to unsettle all forms of essentialism, emphasizing the invention of tradition, the hybridity of cultures, and the multiplicity of identities. These latter sensibilities are captured in the phrase “cultural politics of difference” (Alarcón 1990, Anzaldúa 1987, de Lauretis 1990, Sandoval 1990, West 1990); the most comprehensive and influential application of this argument to Latin America is Nestor García Canclini’s *Culturas Hibridas* (1995; see also Escobar 1992b, Quijano 1995).

The tension between these two dimensions of identity politics in Latin America has not received sufficient attention. If García Canclini’s assertion that all cultures in Latin America are now “hybrid” is meant to characterize the diverse

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4 This information comes from personal communication with Stefano Varese, who attended both meetings. See Varese (1994).
political sensibilities of the contemporary moment, then it surely is overstated. Many initiatives consistent with the first dimension of identity politics make recourse to unreflexive premises about “tradition” and “cultural continuity from time immemorial,” not to mention assertions of bounded identities that obscure internal lines of differentiation and inequity. When assertions about the predominance of the cultural politics of difference are made across the board—especially in relation to indigenous movements, (e.g. Shapiro 1994)—they take on the flavor of theoretically driven wishful thinking. As Dirlik (1996b) has argued recently, the widespread theoretical homage paid to the “cultural politics of difference” and the equally widespread persistence of essentialism are not an awkward incongruence to be avoided or wished away, but rather a problem to be confronted and explained. A similar argument has been made in regard to the widespread resonance of Afrocentrism among African American communities and the ascendency of “cultural politics” theoretical sensibilities in most African American academic circles (Gordon & Anderson 1997).

One response to this problem involves the notion of “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 1985), which advances the claim that people deploy essentialist political rhetoric as conscious strategies rather than eternal truths. Yet one wonders to what extent this accurately portrays how participants in many forms of identity politics actually think about what they are doing. An alternative approach might be to challenge the very dichotomy between essentialism and “constructivism,” to posit that essentialism is inherent in all speech and action, and to focus instead on “who is utilizing [essentialism], how it is deployed, and where its effects are concentrated” (Fuss 1989, p. 20; see also, Scott 1991, Shohat 1992).

This call for greater attention to what essentialism means and does in specific contexts is nicely illustrated in Joanne Rappaport’s work on the politics of memory in a highland indigenous community of southern Colombia. Rappaport shows, for example, how the term recuperación (repossession), around which the movement of indigenous militancy has crystallized, at times encompasses historical claims that could be considered essentialist, but at times also becomes “a gloss for economic innovation...regardless of whether these methods actually find their roots in the past” (1994, p. 11). This does not require one to abdicate critical analysis but proposes simply to acknowledge that the very category “essentialist”—and its supposed opposite “constructivist”—may be useful to track theoretical allegiances within the academy, but that it is insufficiently attentive to the range of ways that “essentialist” precepts are woven into political consciousness and practice, and the highly variable material consequences that result (see also Campbell 1994, Warren 1997).

Beyond noting these two dimensions in the contents of identity politics, we can also draw distinctions according to how specific political initiatives came into being. A first distinction is between subjects or identities that were once
nominally included in national-popular political visions in name, even if suppressed in practice, versus those that have arisen anew, from outright neglect or suppression in the traditional political arena. Initiatives that fit the first category most clearly are those associated with the rights of women and racial or ethnic “minorities.” National-popular political initiatives in contemporary Latin America invariably have made some provision for the “participation” of women in its ranks, developing some notion of the specific rights of women in the context of that initiative’s overall political goals and vision. The same is true—if perhaps to a somewhat lesser extent—for the relationship with peoples of indigenous and African descent. These antecedents are crucial because they constitute a past involvement that shapes the subsequent contents of the initiative: an acknowledged debt to the Left for its role in propelling such activism, a growing frustration with the lack of responsiveness to specific political demands grounded in cultural difference, and an eventual break motivated by the perceived need for autonomy. In this sense, the longstanding debate on the problem of “double militancy” within Latin American women’s organizations (Sternbach et al. 1992) runs roughly parallel to the tension-ridden history of indigenous organizing within a broader Left coalition (Barre 1983, Bonfil Batalla 1981). Growing criticism of this marginalization has spawned efforts to bring to light the autonomy and agency of the groups in question at previous moments of history (e.g. Campbell 1994, Franco 1989). Although generally important and salutary corrective steps, these rereadings risk projecting uniform goals, consciousness, and identity onto people engaged in prior moments of struggle, rather than viewing each moment in historical context.

Such a history of entanglement and ambivalence does not encumber the second category: identities that received little or no recognition with prior representations of the national-popular. A prime example here is the emergence of gay and lesbian identity politics (Lancaster 1997). Other examples of the second category include emergent identities and politics revolving around environmental degradation (Martínez-Alier 1991, Sanderson 1993) and human rights activism (Schirmer 1997, Wilson 1997). While these arguably do have histories of recognition and validation within national-popular projects, they often are propelled by sharply discontinuous ideologies and political sensibilities. Human rights movements focused on the “disappeared,” for example, often have emerged from discursive spaces created and validated by the dictatorships they oppose; such movements often put “conservative” premises—that women are inherently apolitical, that motherhood is inviolable—to the service of efforts to account for the missing, and to bring those responsible to justice (e.g. Perelli 1994).

A final category encompasses politics in the name of people who were once privileged signifiers of national-popular projects that have lost their allure.
One of the most ubiquitous slogans of the Sandinista revolution—“only the peasants and workers will reach the end (llegarán hasta el final)”—helps to make this point, if unintentionally. Peasants and workers are still around, still politically active, in some places dramatically so. But one would be hard pressed today to find a political initiative of national scope that makes peasants and workers the privileged signifier, as the Sandinistas did. These identities must now share the stage with a host of others, at best forming tenuous alliances, at worst competing for scarce international funds in an ideological climate where “Indian” causes are much more exciting and important than “peasant” ones, where funders lavish attention on any initiative with “gender” in the title yet consider workers’ rights passé or even antisocial. Another prominent facet of this “decentering” is for studies of peasant or worker politics to address cross-cutting inequities of gender and race/ethnicity (Alonso 1995, Edelman 1994, Roseberry 1995, Starn 1992, Stolcke 1988). It is striking then that a fine illustration of this new analysis—Michael Kearney’s Reconceptualizing the Peasantry—would conclude that “class differences and differentiation remain the basic theoretical and political issue” (1996, p. 173). Not long ago such an assertion would have triggered accusations of complicity with homogenizing Marxist suppression of difference, yet in this context the phrase reads as a fresh insight, a touchstone in an effort that receives high praise even from “arch postmodernists” like George Marcus. Here is another sign of theoretical clearing, an opening for research on peasant politics finally freed from the twin orthodoxies that forced us to choose between class as the last-instance answer to all analytical questions, and class as the analytical question that never even gets asked.

OUTCOMES AND CONSEQUENCES

The prospects for a theoretical clearing seem least encouraging in regard to the question of consequences. It is one thing to approach a rough consensus on the emergence of a shift, its explanation, and characterization, and quite another to do so on assessments of the consequences: what people engaged in various forms of identity politics have achieved, and can hope to achieve, with what impact on their daily lives. Here, major divergences on key concepts of power, resistance, hegemony, and structural transformation tend to surface, producing a chasm that would seem difficult to bridge. The strongest argument for the “creative renewal” potential of identity politics resides in the intrinsic value of decentralized and multifaceted political activity, a rejuvenation of the political engendered by transformations in the very meaning of “doing politics.” This involves not only expanding and diversifying what counts as political—calling into question the dichotomy between public and (allegedly
nonpolitical) private spheres, for example—but also innovation in the realm of strategy and tactics. The term “subversion” sheds its former meaning of “conspiring against the system” and refers instead to the art of working at the interstices, finding the inevitable cracks and contradictions in the oppressor’s identity, discourse, or institutional practice, and using them to the subaltern’s advantage. Even the “fragmentation of identity” and the “alienation of the self” that often come with living on the margins can be reinterpreted in this light: No longer symptoms of oppression, they can become key resources in moving toward a “third space” of “multidimensional political subjectivity” beyond the Manichean contra position of oppressor and oppressed (Bhabha 1990, de Lauretis 1990).

Yet it is not necessary to go to the extreme of celebrating fragmentation and alienation to make the case. In his critique of development, for example, Es- cobar (1995) offers an intriguing hypothesis that fits nicely with the “interstices” argument. Groups with greater insertion in the market, Escobar suggests, have better chances of “affirming their ways of life” (presumably by exploiting opportunities from within) than those “clinging” to conventional identities and strategies predicated on resistance from outside the political economic system. Another example is the much-needed revisionist work on the politics of conversion from Catholicism to evangelical Protestantism (Brusco 1995, Burdick 1993, Stoll 1990). Dispelling simplistic recourse to the ideological thralldom of these new religions, these analyses point to the spaces opened—for women’s assertion against abusive men, for more participatory religious practice—to explain the shift. Similarly, Diane Nelson’s (1996) phrase “Maya hacker” refers (among other things) to how Maya cultural activists in Guatemala have found ways to hack out a space within the national political arena, subverting the traditional-modern dichotomy that has always been used against them, and at the same time helping to dispel the impression that they are engaged in radical, frontal opposition to “the system.”

From one standpoint, the “material consequences” of such political initiatives are self-evident and extensive. Merely to name forms of inequality that previously had no place in the realm of politics is in itself highly significant. The vibrancy, and in some cases substantial gains, of indigenous and women’s movements throughout Latin America speak volumes on the benefits that accrue when particular identities become politicized and break out from under the tutelage of the national-popular. It is especially clear that the Pan-American indigenous movement is “gaining ground” as the title to a recent special issue of NACLA announces (see also, for example, Van Cott 1994). Even references to the “revitalization of civil society,” though often vague and difficult to assess in a rigorous manner, point to processes that must be taken seriously. Yet it is striking that analyses in this vein are so circumspect on the
question of consequences, especially in the relation to enduring political and economic inequities. In regard to new social movements, the unmediated enthusiasm has passed, replaced by more sober assessments of advances and setbacks, more carefully worded provisos that their political character “is not given in advance” but rather “rests on the articulations they may establish with other social struggles and discourses” (Escobar 1995, p. 221). Kay Warren, in a cogent and comprehensive analysis of the Maya movement and its challenge to the “unified social movement” paradigm, similarly concludes that “it is too early to know what sort of impact the Pan-Mayan movement...will have” (Warren 1997, p. 45). While in many ways it surely is too early, this conclusion also highlights a broader dilemma: discarding the “unified social movement” paradigm also means discarding unified criteria through which “impact” used to be assessed. Developing new criteria, which neither suppress nor uncritically defer to the claims of the movement itself, is a task that research on identity politics is just now beginning to confront.

In the context of this task, hard questions posed from the other side of the divide remain useful. Teresa Ebert (1993), for example, obliges us to think through the conditions under which a privileging of the cultural politics of difference might turn “ludic,” concerned mostly with the aesthetic pleasures of theoretical elegance, unengaged with what Schepet-Hughes (1995) has aptly called the “political economy of suffering.” Echoing general theoretical concerns (Shohat 1992, Young 1995), I have investigated the dilemmas and contradictions that result when the ostensibly progressive theories of “hybridity” and “mestizaje” travel to Guatemala and are used by elites to delegitimize Maya cultural activism (Hale 1996). Mindful of Foucault-influenced critiques of resistance (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1990, Brown 1996), Edmund T Gordon (1998a) has suggested that we work harder to draw analytical distinctions between different forms of resistance rather than jettisoning the entire concept. Finally, many scholars have argued for a more fully dialectical analysis of the global context of local resistance movements. They acknowledge the contestatory potential of movements that emerge from the interstices of the capitalist system, while at the same time pointing to the formidable limits set by that system, not so much as external constraints but as forces that constitute the very precepts on which the local itself has been predicated (Dirlik 1996a, Friedman 1990, Miyoshi 1993). Such questionings are especially constructive when they have been influenced, even partly constituted by, theoretical insights implicit in the phrase “cultural politics of difference.” Then their insistence on analysis of material consequences rings true. In part reflections of theory-war fatigue, such convergences also arise from a novel set of material settings that form the underpinnings of intellectual production itself. It is therefore fitting to conclude by once more making intellectuals themselves the focus of analysis.
Following Yúdice (1996), Franco (1994), and others, I have suggested that the erosion of the national-popular has also entailed a crisis among Latin American intellectuals. A major task that this points to, but does not complete, is the systematic comparative analysis of US and Latin America–based intellectuals’ responses to this crisis. I do argue that past theoretical polarities—between materialist and discursive analysis, between emphasis on social totality and particularity—have declining utility as organizing principles of such responses. This would seem to be the perspective of a third “critical modernist” position, exemplified in the work of Argentine literary critic Beatriz Sarlo (1993). The age of postmodern identity politics, for Sarlo, far from providing the basis for celebratory renewal, most accurately reflects the combined effects of commercialism and media-saturated superficiality, a politics that, having lost a sense of “scale and distance,” has been reduced to “icon, image, or simulacrum.” Yet her stance toward Marxist analysis, socialist politics, and the former role of the national-popular intellectual is equally critical: Gone are the days when these intellectuals could present themselves as a vanguard with a “special role of explaining the big picture” (vocación generalizadora) derived from the combination of broader vision and organic links to the social. In Sarlo’s appraisal, intellectuals with political ambitions have nowhere to turn: They either resign themselves to obscurity and irrelevance, join the wave of privatization and become “experts,” or parlay their skills in social analysis into cultural capital that wins them positions in neoliberal governments (e.g. Arturo Warman of Mexico, FH Cardoso of Brazil, JJ Brunner of Chile). Sarlo finds a limited defense against hopelessness in cultural criticism, which rests on the reassertion of aesthetic and ethical values, if not political or theoretical solutions.

Compelling in analytical acuity and in the ability to place intellectual production (including her own) in historical context, Sarlo’s resting place, as Jean Franco (1994, p. 21) notes, “cannot be disentangled as easily as she would wish from the exclusionary and elitist culture of modernism.” What would happen, though, if the implications of Sarlo’s analysis were carried in a different direction, instead of withdrawal into the rarefied space of cultural criticism, toward direct engagement with political actors who confront the “crisis of modernity” in all its mundane, contradictory, oppressive daily manifestations? This would entail a modest form of political engagement, as skeptical as the actors themselves are apt to be of grand ideologies, political visions, or theoretical statements that neatly link local struggles to “broader realities.” Within Latin America, intellectual production positioned in this way is especially apt to go unnoticed beyond the local context, precisely because the facilitating material conditions for communication of the resulting ideas are largely absent. US-based anthropologists enjoy advantages on this score, though economic privilege and northern provenance make engagement more
difficult and perhaps inherently contradictory. Despite such problems, this locally engaged “critical modernist” approach is a useful place to start in building a broader analysis of identity politics, beyond the theoretical polarization of the previous moment.

One way to track this emergent trend is to look not only at theoretical allegiances but also at how the research itself is carried out. This brings into focus, for example, new forms of experimentation with collaboration and dialogue with the subjects of research, and with local organic intellectuals (Escobar et al 1997, Field 1997, Scheper-Hughes 1992), the rise in critical human rights scholarship, which in turn is grounded in human rights activism (Falla 1994, Montejo 1993, Turner 1995); a growing interest of ethnography of the powerful, with an intent to use resulting knowledge in empowering ways (e.g. Schirmer 1996); efforts to place Latin American studies in hemispheric perspective, which highlights connections between distant and nearby struggles, challenging the divide between homework and fieldwork (Hemispheric Initiative of the Americas 1993, Kearney 1990); and experimentation with the medium of presentation of the research results with hopes of moving anthropology toward effective communication beyond academia proper (Starn 1994, Turner 1992).

This empirically driven, theoretically seasoned, and politically engaged work on identity politics in Latin America offers a potential source of rejuvenation for anthropology more generally. The crisis of oppositional intellectuals in Latin America and the crisis of “ethnographic authority” among US-based anthropologists run parallel to each other. Among both groups, the role of intellectuals as intermediaries who provide data on, interpret, and theorize about the subjects of identity politics, is confronting an ever more serious challenge. How intellectuals respond to this challenge becomes an analytical and political question in its own right. Deprived of easy claims to “organic ties” with political actors “on the ground,” deprived of fieldwork sites with docile, cooperative subjects, one common recourse in both cases is to withdraw. Yet the challenge also creates a mandate for reinvention: a call for intellectuals to develop methods and analytical categories that engender more constructive engagement with the multiple inequalities that organize the worlds we live in and study. This may at least help to prevent scenarios in which theoretical debate, though presenting itself as a few steps ahead of political practice, descends into self-referentiality. It will at least keep theory and activism engaged with each other, and in the best of cases could even produce ethnography that casts some light on the problems and opportunities that lie ahead.

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