

From Identity Politics to Radical Democracy: The Future of Feminism

Consider the following passage from Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. Reflecting at the end of the book on the difficulties of basing feminism on the identity “woman,” she writes:

If identities were no longer fixed as the premise of a political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old (149).

In her work after *Gender Trouble*, most notably in *Bodies that Matter*, *Excitable Speech* and *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Butler has given some attention to clarifying and elaborating on this passage and its implications for feminism. For her, a new configuration of feminist politics must involve a turn away from a feminism which relies on the identity “woman” as its unproblematic subject and source of unity and stability and a turn towards a feminism which looks to the questioning of its key terms and claims, and the critical debate that this questioning produces, as the source of its vitality/energy. This turn represents a shift from identity politics (the old) to radical democracy (new). But, what would this new configuration of politics look like and what are the implications of this shift for feminism? Moreover, what kind of shift is it, that is, what is the resulting relationship between identity politics and radical democracy? And, what happens to identity in this shift?

In my dissertation project, entitled “What Happens After Identity Politics? Radical Democracy and the Future of Feminism,” I take up these questions by exploring the possibilities for a feminist radical democracy and tracing the various shifts that occur within feminism when feminism as identity politics is replaced by feminism as radical democracy. Although my project is not limited to Butler’s work or her particular (and sometimes limited) vision of feminism, her passage at the end of *Gender Trouble* on the future of feminism does play a central role in my

thinking about and critical exploration of the viability of feminist radical democracy. It seems fitting then, to focus this presentation on an examination of Butler's words in *Gender Trouble* and their meaning for feminism. In doing this, I am not so much concerned with drawing any conclusions about Butler's project, as I am with trying to make sense of her words in order to be clear about her project and its implications for feminism.

I. The problem with identity politics

In order to understand better Butler's words in *Gender Trouble*, we need to understand what is being critiqued, that is, what is this politics of the old? What is feminist identity politics? In her essay, "Who's Afraid of Identity Politics," Linda Alcoff defines it as a politics in which "one's identity is taken (and defined) [1] as a political point of departure, [2] as a motivation for action and [3] as a delineation of one's politics" (347-348). For her, all three of these aspects reflect "a belief in the relevance of identity to politics" (313); identity serves as a starting point from which to act, as a reason for acting and as a way in which to organize those acts into a movement. Central to the practice of identity politics is a desire for recognition—to be recognized as "inherently valuable" (65)—and a need for autonomy—to not be subsumed under or co-opted by other movements, but to be to able to express one's own unique political voice. More often than not, this is a voice as opposed to voices. An identity politics is based on a singular identity that all members of the group share. Not only does this identity motivate and determine the politics of a group, it creates and shapes that group.

Within different politics of identity, the idea that identity matters for politics is crucial. But, how it is understood and how it is practiced differs widely. In their own various critiques of identity politics, radically democratic feminists are not rejecting the practice altogether nor are

they condemning all identity claims. Instead, they are responding to a dangerous tendency within identity politics, a tendency for uncritically accepting and asserting the identity “woman/women” as the foundation and organizing principle of feminism and failing to see the complex and politicized nature of the identity process.

First, this failure to see the complexity of identity claims results in the fixing of women into very rigid and narrow definitions of woman, definitions that do not account for the dynamic, unpredictable or sometimes harmful ways in which identities gain meaning within cultural and political discourses. According to Butler, feminist identity politics is frequently based on the assumption that identities are given and uncomplicated terms that feminists can simply take up to describe themselves. But, as Butler and others point out, identities are not merely willed into existence by feminist subjects who claim them. These identities have their own history of meanings apart from us, a history that suggests that we can “never fully own” the identities that we claim and that we can never fully predict the effects that a certain claim will have on our political and theoretical projects. And, because identity is situated within an historical process, one that is constantly taking on new meanings, identity is never fixed or fully complete, it is always in process. In this way, identity can never completely capture the complexity of women's lives or exhaust the possibilities for new ways of configuring identity claims on behalf of or by women.

Second, the inability to understand the politicized nature of identity results in the failure of many feminists to explore and interrogate the regulatory practices that dictate which types of individuals are recognized and represented under the identity woman and which individuals are denied that recognition and representation. This inability also results in the failure of feminists to

understand how their uncritical approach to identity politics and the assertion of identity claims could result in the reproduction of some of the very structures that they wish to dismantle.

Feminists who practice identity politics have frequently left many important questions unasked.

Questions such as: Who is and who is not included as a woman in feminist claims for representation and who makes that determination? Or what types of regulatory practices are concealed under the representation of certain identities, like woman, as given?

III. The Shift from Identity Politics to Radical Democracy

Now that we have a working definition of identity politics and its problems, let us return to Butler's passage in *Gender Trouble*.

If identities were no longer fixed as the premise of a political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old (149).

A close reading of this passage provides us with some clues on what the move from identity politics to radical democracy entails for feminism. I see this passage as broken up into two parts with each part indicating a different set of shifts. The first part—"If identities were no longer fixed as the premise of a political syllogism..."—points to a shift in the key practices of feminist politics and theory.

1. **"If identities were no longer fixed as the premise of a political syllogism..." then feminism would no longer rely on the identity "woman" as its unproblematic subject and source of unity and stability. Instead, it would look to the questioning of its key terms, and the critical debate that this questioning produces, as the source of its vitality.** Feminism "proceeds precisely," Butler argues, "by bringing critical attention to bear on its premises in an effort to become more clear about what it means, and to begin to negotiate the conflicting

interpretations [and] irrepressible democratic cacophony of its identity” (Butler 415). This process of negotiation, which Butler labels a “difficult labor of translation” and which Wendy Brown describes as a form of debate taking place in public, democratic spaces, replaces identity as the focus and becomes the (groundless) ground of feminism.

2. “If identities were no longer fixed as the premise of a political syllogism...” then feminism would not work to reconcile and contain its multiple differences in order to promote itself as having a unified front and being clearly distinguishable from other social movements. Instead, it would recognize and embrace the complexity of differences present within relationships between feminists and between feminism and other social movements.

According to Janet Jakobsen in *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference*, feminism (as identity politics) has frequently had a “simple commitment to diversity,” that is, a commitment that only recognizes diversity as involved in “relatively autonomous axes of differentiation” such as “gender,” “race,” “class” (5). This simple commitment fails to consider the extent to which differences complicate feminism and its relationships. Nancy Fraser echoes this critique in her book, *Justice Interruptus*, arguing that this failure “tends to balkanize culture, setting groups apart from one another [women of color vs. white women, middle-class vs. lower class women, heterosexual women vs. lesbians], ignoring the ways they cut across one another, and inhibiting cross-group interaction and identification” (Fraser 185). For many radically democratic feminists, what is needed is a new type of feminism that works to “map out the interrelationships that connect, without simplistically uniting, a variety of dynamic and relational positionalities [that is, identities or experiences] within the political field” (114-115).

3. If identities were no longer fixed as the premise of a political syllogism...” then feminism would no longer rely on a coherent, stable definition as the necessary starting point for its political and theoretical practices. Instead, it would look to the practice of negotiating between conflicting identities and conflicting understandings of feminism as the way in which to develop a vital and effective movement. Feminists who promote identity politics have devoted a considerable amount of attention to uncovering or developing a definition of the identity “woman/women” that is substantial enough to serve as the unifying force and subject of feminism. In their search for this definition, these feminists are willing to explore a wide range of different (and seemingly conflicting) understandings of woman, but only up to a certain point. Before engaging in the actual practice of feminism, these feminists believe that the theorizing about women and her differences must stop and a unified definition of woman/women has to be put forth as the identity of feminism. For many feminists, without a unified identity, feminism is unable to effectively act. In contrast, feminists who promote radical democracy are committed to “maintain[ing] a political culture of contestation” (*CHU* 161) in which no claims, ideas or identities are taken for granted and in which critical thinking and theorizing is never divorced from political action.

b. Shift Two

Now let us turn to the second part of the passage: If “politics [were] no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects...”. This passage indicates a shift in feminism’s understanding of subjectivity, community and political goals.

1. If “politics [were] no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects...” then the feminist subject would no longer be seen as existing prior to (and outside) of politics. Instead it would be recognized that this subject is shaped, in both helpful and harmful ways, through her participation in the process of feminist politics. Radically democratic feminists caution against the promotion of a coherent, stable and unproblematic self that is fully confident in her actions and completely self-assured in her claims for identity. Butler writes, “the insistence on coherent identity as a point of departure presumes that what a “subject” is is already known, already fixed, and that the ready-made subject might enter the world to negotiate its place” (115). But, Butler and other radically democratic feminists wonder, at what cost is this coherence promoted? And, what complexity (that is, complexity of subject positions, relationship to power, participation in system one is critiquing) is it covering over? The feminist radically democratic subject is still able to participate in politics and make identity claims, but she does not believe that her actions are completely under her control, that she has full knowledge of who she is and what she wants or that she can easily take up subject positions/identities and use them to locate herself within discourse. The feminist radically democratic subject recognizes her own vulnerability and the limits of her knowledge and chooses to act anyway.

2. If “politics [were] no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects...” then feminist communities would no longer assume that connections among women must exist prior to these women coming together nor would they assume that a “we” of community exists prior to the development of that community. Instead, they would recognize that the “we” of community is something

to be created through the process and hard work of developing that community. Just as radically democratic feminists reject the notion of a ready-made subject—an “I”, they reject the notion of a ready-made set of subjects—a “we”. They believe that the creation of a “we” is possible, but it is always contingent, part of an ongoing project in which members of a community work to “constitute the term ‘we,’ while simultaneously questioning it and pushing its limits” (Jakobsen, 2). While feminists who practice identity politics frequently have understood community to be based on commonality and shared experiences of oppression and/or social location, feminists who practice radical democracy understand community to be created through the process of taking difference seriously—of negotiating among differences without containing them—and of embracing difference as an important part of any vital movement.

3. If “politics [were] no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects...” then feminist politics would no longer be working for a limited set of goals based on the desire for recognition and the need to have a voice. Instead, feminist politics would expand its scope beyond identity and identity claims to include other political goals, goals that are not concerned with developing and asserting an identity (an “I am”) but with working towards the development of a collective good (a “what I want for us”). Radically democratic feminists are not rejecting the value of identity claims and recognition, but arguing that the promotion of recognition as the end goal of a movement leaves many important questions unasked and many important projects unfinished. In an interview done in 2000, Judith Butler contends:

The assertion of identity can never become the end of politics itself. This is a terrible American conceit—the idea that if you accomplish your identity, you are there; that you’ve achieved recognition, status, legitimation; and that that’s the end of your struggle, as if becoming visible, becoming sayable is the end of

politics. That's not the case because what that perspective fails to do is ask, "What are the conditions of sayability, of speakability, of visibility? Does one want a place within them? Does one want to be assimilated to them? Or does one want to ask some more profound questions about how political structures work to delimit what visibility will be and what sayability will be" (337)?

IV. Final Thoughts

This examination of Butler's words at the end of *Gender Trouble* has provided us with some clues about what a shift from identity politics to radical democracy would entail for feminism. It seems as if feminist radical democracy is not a rejection of identity politics or of identity claims, but a call to think critically about what these claims mean for individual subjects and feminist communities and how these claims are made. But, these clues do not offer a complete picture of what feminist radical democracy is and, instead, leave important questions unasked and unanswered. In the interest of time, I will only mention two:

1. The feminist radical democracy of Judith Butler is critical of a certain dangerous tendency within feminist identity politics for failing to consider the fully complexity of the politicized process of identity. Are there other forms of identity politics that do not fall into this trap? (I am thinking of the Combahee River Collective and their 1977 "Black Feminist Statement" and Paula Moya and her work on Cherie Moraga and her realist politics of identity.) If so, how do these practices fit with feminist radical democracy?
2. In her discussions of feminist radical democracy, Butler seems, more often than not, to present identity negatively and as a necessary error. What other roles does identity play within feminism? Does feminist radical democracy allow for a more complex assessment

of identity as being both negative and positive, perhaps simultaneously? Can identity politics allow for this complexity?