

Identity and Marginality

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Each person's self is formed by a reflexive process, in which our perception of how others see us plays a paramount part ... individual self-images and group we-images are not separate things. (Mennell, 1994, p.179)

Studying identities, the processes of their formation and the ways in which they are both shaped by and help to shape wider social and cultural contexts is a key preoccupation in many disciplines of the arts, humanities and social sciences. These fields of academic inquiry are principally concerned with human beings, their thoughts and beliefs, the ways in which they interact with one another and the structures and systems within which these interactions take place. Identities are intricately bound up in each of these concerns. As Stephen Mennell has pointed out identities are multifaceted and layered. They range from the intimately personal and unique to the broadly collective and binding. Identities are a way of making sense of who we are and as such may be the result of a very individual process of reflection and choice and an empowering expression of beliefs, tastes and values. However, identities are also socially constructed and determined by wider social, cultural, political and economic contexts. They may be reinterpreted or even imposed upon certain groups or individuals by others, often as a result of inequalities of power and authority. In this case identities may be divisive and repressive or even rebellious and subversive.

Norbert Elias' 1965 study of established-outsider relations between the residents of the 'village' and the 'estate' in a working class community in the English Midlands provides a clear example of the complexities of identity and inequality and their relevance to the establishment and maintenance of uneven relationships of power and authority. In this study the power of representation and the normative values produced by dominant discourses about the self and the other come to the fore: the 'villagers' are

able to define their own collective identity, using ‘praise gossip’ based on a minority of the best, whilst the collective identity of residents of the ‘estate’ is largely defined for them, using ‘blame gossip’ based on a minority of the worst. The marginality of the members of the ‘estate’ and their lack of power to challenge these definitions is compounded by their absence from key positions in community associations, their lack of a close-knit and effective communications network and perhaps most significantly by the fact that

their own conscience was on the side of the detractors. They themselves agreed with the ‘village’ people that it was bad not to be able to control one’s children or to get drunk and noisy and violent. Even if none of these reproaches could be applied to themselves personally, they knew only too well that they did apply to some of their neighbours. They could be shamed by allusion to this bad behaviour of their neighbours because ... the bad name attached to it ... was automatically applied to them too.
(Elias and Scotson, 1965, pp.202-2).

Yet, the powerlessness of marginalized groups as depicted in this study should not be over emphasised. More recent studies, as well as contemporary social and political developments, have shown that dominant groups’ grip on the power to define and their ability to subordinate alternative identities, values and perceptions of either past or present realities is not limitless. Indeed marginalized people often use identities, both individually and collectively, as a means of challenging normative assumptions and prescriptive values. Thus, for example, in the reunified Germany, citizens of the former GDR have resisted normative assumptions about the reunification process as a ‘natural return’ to a singular national identity defined overwhelmingly by West German values, experiences, structures, even memories and interpretations of the past. In response a range of post-communist East German identities have emerged as an expression of difference and a rejection of the wholesale dismissal of East

German experiences, values and stances in relation to both the past and the present (Hogwood 2000). This form of identity politics, which is certainly not unique to reunified Germany, is at once deeply personal, a basis for the development of communities, and a sometimes very public form of protest against the homogenising tendencies of dominant identities and the social and cultural norms which they embody.

Marginalized groups often face complex choices in defining and enacting their own identities. They may choose, or feel compelled, to assimilate to the norms and values of the dominant group, thus abandoning alternative identities, or at least judging them by the standards of the dominant group as illustrated in Elias' example above, and weakening the collective ties which had defined them as a group in the first place. Alternatively, they may choose to emphasise a separate identity in contrast to dominant norms and to act this out as demonstrably as possible, drawing individual pride and collective strength from such defiance. Such a stance may run the risk of increasing the isolation of marginalized groups and prompting a repressive backlash from the dominant group if it feels its power is threatened. It may also produce a new set of dominant norms within the marginalized group itself, resulting in new fractures and experiences of marginalization for those members who are unable or unwilling to comply. In reality, most marginalized people steer a path between these two extremes developing a multifaceted identity and negotiating complex relationships with a wide variety of individuals and groups.

The articles in this issue of *e-sharp* address many of the dilemmas outlined above and raise a variety of other questions which could not be addressed in a short introduction. Gender, the power of dominant discourses and the challenges faced by individuals or groups who choose not to, or are unable to, comply with their prescriptions is a theme for several papers. Michell Ward considers the liberatory potential of masochism and the ways

in which oppressed women use it to challenge the power structures of the dominant social order. In doing so however, these women may risk a further marginalization as mainstream feminism, itself once a marginalized group, but one which has gained considerable authority and discursive power, struggles to understand their strategies for dealing with oppression and either misinterprets them as victims in need of help or dismisses them as complicit with male violence. Marilyn Michaud examines the concept of 'failed masculinity' through a study of David Ely's novel *Seconds* and finds men struggling to sustain a distinctive masculine identity in an increasingly polarised political world. The novel, she argues, explores the inherent tensions and contradictions between individualism and conformity and finds that the two are irrevocably at odds. Yet prescriptive understandings of gender demand both individualism and conformity of men simultaneously, resulting in an inevitable alienation and a crisis of identity, as the values and behaviour expected of men do not match readily with the realities of their social, economic and political context and/or their personal relationships. Mark Isola studies the letters of Walt Whitman and Charles Stoddard and finds evidence of an emergent modern gay male American aesthetic. Yet here also there are tensions between a unified experience or singular identity and the diversity of expressions of identity and of subjective experiences, in this case revealed by a generational difference in the expression of American male-to-male desire.

Katie Klein's paper also demonstrates a concern with gender as a construct for defining identities within structures of inequality and uneven power. However, in her analysis of the character of the anglicized Jewess in Grace Aguilar's writing she also brings in another important aspect of identity politics and one which several other papers in this issue share: the question of national, religious or ethnic identities. Potentially doubly marginalized both by her femaleness and by her Jewishness in Victorian England, Aguilar's anglicized Jewish woman serves to diminish the

differences between Judaism and Christianity by evoking traditional domestic ideals, which are central to images and expectations of womanhood regardless of religion. Anne Faulkner continues a Judaic theme, but in a different era and with a turning of the tables of dominance and marginality, as she explores the Jerusalem Conference convened to debate the position of Gentile believers within the Jesus movement as described in Paul's Letter to the Galatians, 2.1-10. Faulkner argues that this admission of a new group within a religious community with well-established practices and observances which were regarded as central to a rather exclusive identity, posed a threat to the social identity of Jewish believers. This could only be overcome by a degree of separation between Gentiles and Jews within the Jesus movement, one which eventually contributed to new forms of marginality and shifting relationships of power. Teresa Novotna also deals with questions of national identity and marginality in her study of the tense relationship between the Czechoslovak nation and national minorities as a significant factor in the break-up of Czechoslovakia before WWII.

The articles by Corinna Krause and Sophia Marshman deal with questions of representation, memory and the role of literature and popular culture in communicating experiences of oppression and marginalized identities to a broader audience. The perspectives of the two articles are very different. Krause examines the relationship between Gaelic literature and English translations and questions the validity of viewing the Gaelic situation through postcolonial eyes. Marshman argues that the voice of the survivor has been marginalized in representations of the Holocaust portrayed in popular films and novels, because the dominant society prefers a 'soft option' of sentimental melodrama which focuses on the few who survived rather than the majority who were killed. In both papers however, questions of authenticity and memory are important and the ability of a dominant group to properly express the experiences and represent the identities of oppressed peoples is called into question.

Finally Clair Deal and Pam Fox' study of service-learning and the experiences of students involved in a documentary photography project with inmates at a local jail brings together theoretical understandings of identity, marginality and privilege with the practical experiences of and insights into the workings of power and control between privileged and marginal groups. Questions of representation and authenticity are also highlighted in this paper, as the students' involved in the study found their stereotypes about incarcerated people challenged and the question of giving voice to marginalized people's became central to the project.

This issue of e-sharp, therefore, offers a fascinating and stimulating discussion of questions which are central to the study of human experience and interaction. The papers are wide ranging in their focus, disciplinary background and approach to studying identity and marginality. Yet, they share a number of key themes and their findings highlight the importance of representation, power, self-definition and collective identities and the tensions between these aspects of identity formation and experiences of in/exclusion.

Bibliography

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