

Predrag Krstić

Thinking identity with difference: Society and theory

Abstract: The first part of the article notes the sudden and conspicuous interest for the problem of identity at the turn of the 21st century. It presents Modern and postmodern conceptualizations of collective identity of social theorists. In the second part, the text draws on the legacy of philosophical speculation of the same period. The article aims to show that many of the dilemmas faced by latter-day humanities in their efforts to articulate their thinking of identity as well as difference still have a relevant “pre-game” in the structural and dialectical interrelatedness thematized by philosophers of classical German idealism and the “philosophers of difference.” The text concludes that such “metaphysical” reflection comprises an unavoidable element, which can only be ignored by social theory at its own peril, even if it is not bound by the reflection’s findings.

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Since the last decade of the twentieth century, the term “identity” has noticeably shifted from being a technical term used in philosophic literature into well-nigh the framework of all intellectual debates (cf. Jenkins 1996: 7-8). Suddenly, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, geographers, historians, political scientists, each in their own register, have something to say about identity: from discussion about its constitutionality for the Modern age, to its postmodern repudiation, to various feminist attempts to deconstruct gender conventions of society, to the muddled resurrection of nationalisms and ethnicities as significant political forces. Nor were scientists the only ones to raise the topic; rather, journalists, politicians, writers, lawyers, along with experts in marketing, consumerism, and PR, piped up as well. All the while, the matter at hand became less and less a *factum brutum* that could be patently recognizable. There is talk of identity as changing – emergence of new, resurrection of old and transformation of the existing – to the point of creation of “politics of identity.”

This could be symptomatic, if it were indeed the case, as Stuart Hall says emphatically (Hall 1996: 2), that concepts are problematized only when they lapse into crisis. To which Kobena Mercer adds, “[i]dentity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty.” (Mercer 1990: 43). For his part, Zygmunt Bauman thinks that the very notion of “identity” could only appear as the problem of identity, that is, we only begin

to think about it when we are no longer certain where we belong. “Identity’ is a name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty:” it is a “critical projection of what is demanded and/or sought upon what is; or, more exactly still, an oblique assertion of the inadequacy or incompleteness of the latter” (Bauman 1996: 19).

Thus, responsible contemporary thought regarding identity had to auto-historicize. When it comes to the humanities, they usually register the way in which the crisis of identity and its pursuit decisively mark a new era. What is it that caused this change and what does it comprise?

Modern Times

The story is as follows. Rapid changes have always characterized the Modern period, but the late Modern has seen a vertiginous acceleration, making it difficult to maintain a single, unified and confident sense of one’s self. Where once upon a time, allegedly, identity was chiefly influenced by the belonging to a larger social group, usually class or nation, identities have become more varied and unstable. Processes of industrialization and urbanization, increased social and geographic mobility, breakdown of earlier social formations, the rupture of close-knit homogenous communities that rigorously passed down established mores and values from generation to generation – have all weakened the influence of inherited rules and conventions, opening new spaces and sources for personal identity.

The usual culprit for this is taken to be globalization. The ease and frequency with which people traverse the world, along with increased communication, have resulted in the creation of a “cultural supermarket.” People are no longer forced to build their identities on the ground on which they reside; rather, they can chose from a wide palette of myriad identities. They might adopt a form of speaking or dressing, values and lifestyles of their choice. On the other hand, the globalized consumption of ubiquitously found products could lead to ever greater homogenization and sameness in people. Globalization, therefore, contains contradictory tendencies, all of which, however, jeopardize existing identities. The unification of the global consumer threatens identities rooted in belonging to specific social groups. The greater choice of identity, on the other hand, means that even people living next to one another, or even belonging to the same social group, could have entirely different identities.

The Modern era, which saw the bankruptcy of traditional signposts bring us face to face with a litany of choices for one’s self and condemn us to recurring reconstitution and vigilant protection of our identities, is thus the birth-place of the very problem it is currently problematizing (see Giddens 2010;

Hall 1992). The “postmodern” cardinal dissolution of identity and its nostalgia-free undermining will only push Modernity’s burgeoning crisis of identity towards paroxysm, mercilessly sealing the probate hearing documents.

Perhaps the most illustrative distinction between the Modern and “postmodern condition,” regarding identity comes from Zygmunt Bauman. According to him, the typical representative of the Modern is the “pilgrim,” the Weberian protestant, following a clearly marked, measured, manifest path towards an equally clear goal. Life is a pilgrimage, a patient ambling toward this goal, and a deferment of pleasure with this aim in mind (Bauman 1996: 22-23). The postmodern world, however, is entirely different, and “inhospitable to pilgrims.” Here any notion of path and goal is lost, whereas both time and space are comminuted. All endeavor is shorn of the temporal: “cut the present off at both ends,” in an attempt to achieve a “continuous present” (Bauman 1996: 24). The imperative of the times is avoidance of all binding ties to people or locations, avoidance of responsibility and loyalty. In lieu of searching for identity, one is concerned with none “sticking” too strongly: “The hub of postmodern life strategy is not identity building, but avoidance of fixation,” given that “well constructed and durable identity turns from an asset into a liability” (Bauman 1996: 24).

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Typical representatives or “life strategies” of the postmodern are the stroller, the vagabond, the tourist, the player. All of which existed before, but have shifted from being marginal minorities to the majority, thus changing their meaning. “All four intertwining and interpenetrating postmodern life strategies have in common that they tend to render human relations fragmentary and discontinuous; they are all up in arms against ‘strings attached’ and long-lasting consequences, and militate against the construction of lasting networks of mutual duties and obligations.” (Bauman 1996: 33)

In general, postmodern practice has established a pluralist (dis)position, and corresponding theory has expanded the ensuing consequences onto the intellectual life of the West, therein including the humanities (cf. Alexander 1995). It proclaims – with as much hope as abandon – that the new epoch can yet represent a dawning and not the dusk of emancipation, if only it could liberate itself of universalist tendencies of identity logic inherited from the Modern (see, for example, Bauman 1995; Seidman 1991). Such “emancipation,” however, even if possible, has turned out to be neither linear nor easily executed.

In the absence of a “main” or arch-identity that in Modern times acted as umbrella for different identities and oriented political struggles, the sixties and seventies of the last century saw people begin to organize into “new social movements” that deal with a diversity of interest and self-identification.

Identity was no longer simply determined by class or ethnicity; it was now based in gender, religion, age, relation toward ecology, etc. Accordingly, feminism, minority rights struggles, anti-nuclear, ecology and other movements assumed their place on the political stage. With the advent of new social movements, identity itself became a political question (cf. Spasić 2003). Indeed, what emerges is a “politics of identity” that deals – only at first glance paradoxically – with *differences* between groups of people and opportunities of individuals to express these differences, emphasizing the importance of alternate voices, in particular those of subjugated groups.

Feminisa(c)tion

The aporias of efforts to create deflection from what appears to be unappealable identification with narrow and immutable identities is perhaps best illustrated through the history of feminism. Organized in the mid sixties, the movement for the liberation of women resulted, albeit with delayed effect, in significant social and political changes, which, however, served to reinforce a gender neutral model of society. The concept of gender difference was at the time still de-emphasized by focusing on equality, given that women struggled above all to gain the right to full participation in all areas of society. Social justice demanded that gender not be presented as difference. Expectations ran high: women would achieve freedoms heretofore unavailable to them and sexism would vanish.

However, with everyone being poorer and more desperate after eighties Thatcherism and Reaganism, the women’s movement was at a loss to say whether anyone was liberated. With their confidence shattered, certain women activists abandoned the fruitlessly compromised calls for equality and social reform. Giving up on the “utopia of social change,” many found a privileged haven in certain culturally and ideologically victimized identities (ethnic minorities, religious groups, LGBT and disabled persons). The defensive pessimism that marked Second-wave feminism gave birth to “identity politics” – emphasizing a strong collective identity of a group as the basis of political analysis and action.

In short, identity politics understands activism as righteous separatism, as a beneficent return to one’s self, and focusing of political aims on group self-affirmation. The cost of the psychological relief provided by such a strategy was the impossibility, or limited ability, of broadening the movement and giving it larger social engagement. Fear of erosion of imperiled identity prevents or at least discourages nearly any public contact outside the strictly defined group. Seen thus, identity politics is defeatist and desperate, the politics of selfishness and pessimism. In the name of advancing the interests of one’s own group, refusing to engage with society at large, identity politics accepts

the status quo and satisfies itself with “conservation:” protection and celebration of a given collective identity.¹ It could even be said that with the growing awareness of crisis of “minority utopias,” the crisis of the idea of politics (to use Deleuzian language) of “minority-becoming,” a figural mirroring of the opponent was revealed: identity politics has turned out to be “another visage of national hegemony and its ‘normalizing’ function.” (Balibar 2003: 80)

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Identity has thus, according to Paul Gilroy, experienced an “essentialization” when it was least expected: at the very moment it was recognized as a result of cultural history. In one fell counter-attacking swoop, identity moved from its historical origins and landed in the empire of things primordial: it became something prior to history and culture, something fundamental and disinclined to mutation, part of our fixed being, resistant to time and transformation. Fixed, primordial, immutable identity, after all, renders politics itself irrelevant, since it confronts forces more fundamental than that: biological and cultural heritage, kinship, fatherland – all of which are said to regulate human life.² It has, and has always had, but one main, corruptive and compromising threat: difference. Life with difference is seen as none other than “life endangered,” securing the safety of its own collective identity only through separation or carnage (Gilroy 1997: 310-311, 313; see Gilroy 2005: esp. 3, 67).

On the other hand, identity politics – in its best, although most incoherent version – could, in an auto-reflexive move even (try to) escape its own destiny of representing a struggle between “natural subjects.” Jeffrey Weeks offers the argument that one of the main contributions of identity politics was precisely the construction of the politics of difference that subverts the stability of biological categories and the construct of binary opposites (Weeks 1994: 12). New social movements were successful in historicizing experience and outlining differences of marginalized groups as an alternative to the oppression of the “universal.” Finally, it was above all feminism that pointed out, at the latest with H el ene Cixous and her “Sorties” (Cixous 1989), the unequal distribution of dichotomous opposites, nature/culture, body/spirit, passion/reason, that valued and empowered one (the male) sex. It was feminism that insisted on the possibility of circumventing the inevitability of these oppositions, particularly as a source of inequality, arguing for male and female sexuality to be seen as different, not opposed (see, for example, Irigaray 1985; Moore 1994).

1 On the futility – nay, counterproductivity – of feminist identity politics even when it comes to its archenemy, sexism, see Carver 1996: 15 and further; Mandel 2004; Meyers, 2010; cf. Jaggar 1992: 366.

2 Gilroy finds the antidote to this reaffirmation of identity in the concept of diaspora, which he considers subversive of essential and absolute identity, securing the concept of a more complex, ecologically sophisticated and politically effective identity than offered by the current options of genealogy and geography (Gilroy 1997: 304, 339; cf. Woodward 1997: 28).

Nevertheless, the dialectics of identity and difference asserts itself. Difference was thought as a constitutive companion marking the sexualized other (woman), racialized other (indigene), and the naturalized other (animals, environment). These others, however, are constitutive insofar as they are expected to confirm the selfsame Subject in its epistemologically privileged position. Feminists were hasty in adopting a model of epistemic violence inherent in the dialectic, one that inevitably turned out to be another metaphysical compensation and reproduction of the Subject. “Let’s spit on Hegel” (Lonzi 1974) became the rallying cry of an entire generation. The notion of difference as insult thus continued to strike out from the very heart of the history of philosophy, like some “metaphysical cannibalism” of European thought, compiling contributions to its own history of lethal exclusions and fatal disqualifications (Braidotti 1991). In the paradox of the simultaneous globalization and fragmentation, so characteristic of the late Modern, the notion of difference has become still more antagonistic (Benhabib 1999).

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All of which could be put as follows. Through questions of production of the gender subject, feminism initially politicized identity. Then it replaced the thesis that everyone has the same identity “humanity,” with the thesis that men and women were different, thus calling for a unification of “sisters” around sex as “the main identity.” Finally, “feminism of difference” decided to apply the same method and perform microsurgery to point out differences between women. “Intersectionality” became the dominant feminist metaphor for complex identities that, coupled with gender, (once again) comprised race, ethnicity, class and sexual orientation, origin, social status and role (Meyers 2010). This metaphor was a colorful signaling of a theoretical shift, first in outlook and then in mechanism. Initially seen as having some kind of *essential* core that marks a group, identity is now more commonly seen as *contingent*, a product of intersection of various components, political and cultural discourses, and histories.

Interiorized, contingent identity, a dis-unified, plural, *unitas multiplex* of “multi-identitary beings” becomes a unified “familial and local, regional, national and transnational, and eventually confessional and doctrinaire identity” (Morin 1990: 154; see also Morin 2001; cf. Maalouf 2001). However much, though, its experience seemed liberating, it placed these social movements as political projects before new problems, both conceptual and regarding the basis of solidarity of its members (see Rorty 1989: esp. 23-43; also Levinson 1997). Whether it was used to deny a fixed identity of “race,” class, gender or sexuality, thus subverting biological determination, or to establish a new primacy of other essential categories (Woodward 1997: 28), identity appeared as signifying difference. It is necessarily shaped with reference to other identity, that is, in relation to that which it is not, most often precisely in its extreme

form of binary opposition that Saussurean literary theory and recent critical social theory considers essential for the production of difference (see Hall 1997a; Hall 1997b). Difference can be celebrated as a source of diversity, heterogeneity and hybridity, where the affirmation of change and variety is seen as achievement; but it can also at the same time exclude and marginalize those “others” or “outsiders” (Bradley 1997: 214; Woodward 1997: 35). It can symbolically represent a given (id)entity, while at the same time contribute to its social exclusion. Either way, it turns out that “identity, then, is not the opposite of, but *dependent on* difference” (Woodward 1997: 29; author’s emphasis).

Retrospec(ula)tion

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It is, however, difficult to escape the feeling that the dilemmas faced by contemporary humanities in their efforts to articulate the concept of collective identity are a repetition of the speculative philosophical tradition’s intentions and dilemmas in its own thinking of identity. Operating on the plane of social theory, contemporary humanities’ endeavors testify to the necessity of a discursive conception of the notion and principle of identity in its logical effect and heuristic fruitfulness, but perhaps even more, within its limits and internal contradictions that, as we realize ever anew, put it into play with its necessary constitutive double: difference.

Leibniz wonders, in what seems to be full awareness of the alternating or even terminologically interchangeable mirroring, about both at once: “What identity or diversity is?” (Leibniz 1982: 229). In a way that is not free of equivocation, he draws on the Scholastic tradition of determining one fixed being, unique to each time and place. The discreteness that follows from the principle of individuation prevents their simultaneous spatial coexistence,³ meaning that it prevents the existence of two examples of any one thing, whether angel or droplet of water or milk (Leibniz 1982: 306): “An ingenious gentleman of my acquaintance, discoursing with me, in the presence of her Electoral Highness the Princess Sophia, in the garden of Herrenhausen, thought he could find two leaves perfectly alike. The princess defied him to do it, and he ran all over the garden a long time to look for some; but it was to no purpose.” (Leibniz 1982: 244)

“Happy times for metaphysics those, when it was practiced at court and no greater effort was called for to demonstrate its propositions than to compare

3 Put more precisely and mathematically, Leibniz’s “principle of indiscernability of identity” (*principium identitatis indiscernibilium*) by shifting the focus of the position of identity ($A=A$) proves that there are no two things in the world that would be absolutely identical, that each individual is a world onto itself: if something is identical to itself, then each thing is identical *only* to itself; if this is the case, then each thing is different from all other things, that is, there could be no two identical things (Leibniz 1982: 230-231).

the leaves of trees!" (Hegel 1970: 53 / Hegel 2010: 366 (II 271)). Early on in "The Objective Logic", Hegel develops Leibniz's intuition regarding identity and difference by placing the two in a dialectical relationship. Thought as "internal reflection," identity, self-equation, appears as essence, as "immediacy of reflection," as "construction of the self as unified," as "pure production of one's self from the self." Such "essential identity" is in no way similar to that "abstract identity" that would "regenerate from something other," nor did it come about through "relative negation" that would unfold outside of it, rendering difference separate from identity, leaving it, as before, external. Because thought that holds before it this abstract identity and "difference as apart and separate from it," remains superficially reflexive, never reaching the knowledge of identity.⁴ "The concept of identity, a simple negativity that refers itself to itself, is not the product of external reflection but derives from being [*Sein*] itself. Contrary to this, the identity that stays distant from difference [*Unterschied*], and the difference that stays distant from identity, are the products of external reflection and of an abstraction that arbitrarily clings to this point of indifferent difference [*Punkte der gleichgültigen Verschiedenheit*]." (Hegel 1970: 40 / Hegel 2010: 357 (II 261)).

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Hegel is particularly keen to show that what is considered the first law of thought, the law of identity ($A=A$ in its positive expression) and the law of noncontradiction (A cannot at the same time be A and not A), is "not at all a law of thought, but, on the contrary, the opposite of such a law." Hegel would like to show that on closer consideration, these propositions contain more than is meant by them: their own opposition as "absolute difference" (Hegel 1970: 44-45). What is expressed in this contentless and shortsighted principle of identity is "empty tautology," turning identity into "a one-sided determination that as such contains no truth," or rather contains naught but "a formal, abstract, incomplete truth." As long as this inert, "empty identity" refuses to see that in the very claim not to be difference, but its opposite, it is precisely asserting that it is something different, a difference to difference,

4 "In its opinion, reason is no more than a loom intertwining warp (say, identity) and woof (say, difference [*Unterschied*]), joining them externally; or, if it turns to analysis, now specifically pulling out identity, and at the same time also obtaining difference alongside it; now a comparing [*Gleichsetzen*], and also a differentiating [*Ungleichsetzen*] at the same time – a comparing in that it abstracts from difference, and a differentiating in that it abstracts from the comparing. – One must completely dismiss these assertions and these opinions concerning what reason does, since they are, as it were, of merely historical interest; it is rather the consideration of all things that are that reveals, in them, that each is self-unlike [*ungleich*] and contradictory [*widersprechend*] in its equality with itself [*Gleichheit*], and each self-identical in its difference [*Verschiedenheit*], in its contradiction [*Widerspruche*]: that everything intrinsically is this movement of transition of one of these determinations to the other, and that everything is this transition because each determination is itself, within it, the opposite of itself" (Hegel 1970: 39-40 / Hegel 2010: 357 (II 261)).

and that it is in its very nature, in itself, and not only external to it – to be different. Truth will be complete only when the correct but abstract law of identity is revealed and recognized “in unity of identity with difference.” In order for this to occur, it is necessary to perceive that the very utterance of identity intending to be “in itself the truth and absolute truth” contradicts itself, and that it is indeed the opposite of truth. Identity is not the inert simplicity it claims to be, but rather, “the going beyond itself in dissolution of the self.” Finally, the formal principle of identity that claims a simple, abstract identity, hides “the pure movement of reflection in which otherness immediately disappears.”⁵

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Similarly, and to perhaps an even greater degree, this movement holds true for contradiction, according to which A is not at once equal to not A: the pure other of an A appears only to vanish. The different A and not A refer to one and the same A: identity is shown as “difference in one relation or as simple difference within,” and expressed as the negation of negation. Neither the law of identity or contradiction are thus simply analytical in nature; they are synthetic, with the first containing “a vanishing of the otherness” (*Verschwinden des Andersseins*), and the second holding “absolute inequality, contradiction in itself” (*absolute Ungleichheit, Widerspruch an sich*) (Hegel 1970: 45).

Just as there is a dialectic of identity, there is a dialectic of difference. By which is meant not only Hegel’s statement that difference is “expressed in a particular world,” and that just like identity “it stands for itself regardless of the other.” Even less does it mean the progression from “indeterminate difference” of the proposition that all things are different one from another, to the “determinate difference” of the proposition that arouses bafflement to the unspeculative mind: that there are no two things entirely alike (Hegel 1970: 53). Rather, this is a reference to the movement that appeared after and against Hegel, although perhaps as no more than overemphasis or completion of one of his “moments” – that of critique of abstract identity and (re)affirmation of difference. Identity itself will fall victim to ill repute, becoming impossible, contrary to itself, perhaps even sooner or later “rigid” and fatal (not only, or even not primarily, when it comes to thinking); whereas the salvation of suppressed Differences becomes beneficial. “[I]dentity, which strictly would be identical with nothing more than with itself, annihilates [*vernichtet*] itself. If it no longer goes forth to an other, and if it is no longer an identity of something, then, as Hegel saw, it is nothing at all.” (Adorno 1997a: 512; Adorno 1973: 140)

5 “A is’ is a beginning that envisages a something different before it to which the ‘A is’ would proceed; but the ‘A is’ never gets to it. ‘A is... A’: the difference is only a disappearing and the movement goes back into itself” (Hegel 1970: 44 / Hegel 2010: 360 (II.264)).

(Re)Capitulation

Hegel's incrementally subversive critical path of denouncing abstract identity will be traced further, with the addition of some of Nietzsche's insights, by French "philosophers of difference." Except that they will beat Hegel with the rod he himself used on Schelling for the proposal of an indifferent "philosophy of identity," as well as the fatal conspiracy of his total system and terror. They too become single-mindedly against the identical, while at the same time constituting themselves ambivalently against it: certainly against everything in-different or willingly blind to difference, willing to swallow and digest, to exile and erase, to conceal and suppress difference. "Difference" itself is the "other" to thinking and acting based on (self-)identifying. It is that which is suppressed and relegated lest it vengefully reconstitute the logos of domination; rather it would self-affirmatively affirm the alternative to masterful and glutinous logic of identity. The practical consequences of the latter, the expulsion of even the smallest "otherness," of anything that deviates even in the slightest from the Canon, is recognized straight away in the discursive regimes characterized by "fundamentalist" exclusion, all-powerful watchfulness and zeal for integration or at the very least control of the "unintegrated." The very "pretension to the universal," this pattern of systemic violence of the Same, the tyranny of resolving Projects and absolute Knowledges, must therefore be declared fatal, and its closed and coherent, unified and totalizing structure can no longer – should no longer – be legitimized by seeking its foundation.⁶

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When it comes to Difference, unlike the foundationalists who, prone to final grounding and ultimate solutions, demand of it submission and disappearance, the anti-foundationalists hold that Difference must never remain entirely diffuse and occasionally allow it to acquire the figure, or perhaps just a sketch, in the shape of nature, woman, the body, the Jew, the homosexual, the colored, the homeless, the marginalized... All of which are examples of entities that draw the "rage against difference"⁷ of standardization-seeking and program-oriented conquistadors, delegated to competent institutions that house knowledge of the One, Unchanging, Eternal, Single, Universal, and reproduce epistemological and geographical, symbolic and real scars, colonizing all Other and Different. The "philosophy of decolonization" is in that sense the most direct offspring of the more general movement of discursive (self-)score-settling with Western bad conscience. The most immediate problem of this movement, however, is precisely identity: as part of its own constitution, it at once must and can never profile itself positively.

6 For representative contemporary challenges to foundationalism in this vein, see: Foucault 1971; Rorty 1980; Lyotard 1984.

7 *Wut auf die Differenz* – Horkheimer and Adorno 1997: 233.

Adorno stopped at “critical utopia,” evoking the Jewish “graven image prohibition” and the appropriately negative-dialectical concept-that-resists-to-be-conceptualized of “non-identical” (see Horkheimer and Adorno 1997; Adorno 1997b). In an attempt to establish the priority of difference in relation to all identity, even the desirability of endless proliferation of difference, and certainly the necessity of veto of all identifying self-sedimentation, the philosophers of difference reach for, let us say, a reflected difference as non-indifference. It can be expressed, as it is in Levinas, as the infinite Other in thinking the original difference (Levinas 2011a; Levinas 2011b). Or, in the case of Deleuze, as a more or less explicit privileging of difference in relation to identity (Deleuze 1994). It can also be expressed as the invitation to an adventure of difference, no longer concerned with the irruption of external reality, but a lack of self-knowledge and identity, no longer the otherness of factual entities, but ourselves as undefined beings open to the unknown (Sloterdijk 1988). Also, it can be expressed as Difference metastasized into *différend* in Lyotard, an unbridgeable gap standing at the foot of any reasoned solution and speculative resolution to age-old antagonisms (Lyotard 1988). Finally, it can be expressed as *différance* in Derrida, in that game of presence and absence, that would not rule, govern, ever have authority over anything: “Not only is there no kingdom of *différance*, but *différance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom.” (Derrida 1982: 22).

It could be said that much like Deleuze, Jacques Derrida developed a philosophy of difference; but also, and in contrast to Deleuze, he did not present it as an alternative to the dialectical philosophy of identity. In that sense, Derrida’s philosophic explorations open a double front: they attempt to show, on the one hand, that the operation of the principle of identity always rests on an unacknowledged or unknown game of difference, and on the other, that not even Difference stylized to the absolute can serve as a principle on which one could construct a new philosophical project (see esp. Derrida 1982b; Derrida 1973; Derrida, 1998). It seems that any program based on difference thus understood would already be its own betrayal, that it is precisely thought of as subversion of programmatic thought and projection, and that it would not even like to assume the role of counterbalance. Rather, it would prefer internal movement, dislocation within and by itself, dissolving and reconstituting itself, undermining unstable entities, decoding traces as signs of other traces without final referent. Finally, it seeks escape from theoretical articulation and subversion of its own concepts at the very moment of their establishment. In Derrida therefore, much like in nearly all philosophers of difference, philosophical argumentation acquires a self-negating status, terms become perishable, the reader is presented with paradoxes and metaphors, claims are inverted or their traditional meaning is suspended as soon as it is introduced. In this way, even while other loyalties are being

eschewed, one remains faithful to the highest order: avoid reduction of difference to the logic of Identity, that is to self-identification.

This Other than the self-conscious and always self-identical subject evades not only objectification and reification, but also its own systemic and methodological subjectivization. It willingly abandons attempts to grasp itself conceptually. Aware of the impossibility of holding a position from which the principle of identity could be critiqued, yet not determining such a position, Derrida prefers to use the term “deconstruction” rather than “critique” to describe his efforts. The deconstruction of the principle of identity not only demonstrates the impossibility of the critique of identity in the name of any other Otherness, but it salutes this impossibility, implying that the “self” can never be separated from (its own) other. Philosophy cannot reveal the pure I or the pure Other, but this impossibility itself can no longer be resolved in a Hegelian manner, giving the subject a mandate to mediate through the other. Yet it is also impossible, according to Derrida, to simply reject the Hegelian move and once again suppose, propose or postulate the entirely Other. Such an Other does exist for Derrida, but never in the determinations of identity and presentness. “Every Other is Entirely Other”⁸ – this significant and suggestive phrase gestures precisely towards the aporia of the reflective movement of identity we have traced: affirmation of radical, incommensurate and irreducible Otherness is also a radical affirmation of identity, that is, both the no longer authoritative own and the ungraspable other.

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Finding its confidence and justification for all encompassing behavior in the repetition of self-referentiality (however errant), this conceited self-awareness has ended up in the paradox of “philosophical autism.” Beginning on the level of formal semantics, it belies the necessity of invocation of the one it sought to escape.⁹ The foisting of Otherness, however, has also turned out to be paradoxical, given that it inevitably leads towards a tautological affirmation of identities. To think – yet not abandon the inquiring temptations provoked by wading through these paradoxical positions – remains the mark of that (Hegelian) matrix, within which moves Modern and contemporary thought/practice of personal and social identification.

Conclusion

Let us, however, be fair: not everything proposed about identity has been the repetition of a theme set by Hegel. Although often a consequence of improper

⁸ *Tout autre est tout autre* – Derrida 1994: 82.

⁹ For various places and approaches to this same problem of self-awareness shaken by self-reflection, see, among others, Ameriks and Sturma 1995; Bermudez 1998; Castañeda 1989; Cook 2007; Frank 1991; Henrich 1970; Kapitan 1999; Shoemaker 1968; Beer 2014; Giesen and Seyfert 2016.

or lack of understanding of the speculative philosophical tradition, the compositions of contemporary social theorists certainly have not always been unreflective and inarticulate regarding this tradition. This can in particular be seen when argumentation concludes with the pacification of emphatic fascination with identity of recent scholarship and a kind of diagnosis that there has been “much ado about nothing.”

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Jenkins, for example, is very reserved toward the fact that identity has become the “standard” of the times. He reckons that popular focus on identity is to a large extent a reflection of insecurity caused by the impression that our social map no longer fits our social landscape: we are meeting others whose identity and nature are not clear to us, we are growing insecure before our own selves, the future no longer seems as predictable as it did to previous generations. But confrontations of language, tradition, ways of life, the transformation of division of labor, demographic fluctuation, catastrophe and looming apocalypse – none of these is in any sense “modern” (Jenkins 1996: 9). It was only hubris of Western Modernity that elevated reflective self-identity to an exclusively modern social phenomenon.

“Identity crises” can be traced as far back as the early modern witch hunts or Medieval expulsions of heretics, Jews, lepers and homosexuals. Going even further back into the past, “ontological insecurity” drew reactions already in the times of religions of salvation (Giddens 2010: 53). Buddhism and Augustine’s *Confessions* testify to projects of reshaping and reformation of the self. Typical social identities at the turn of the twenty-first century are, of course, to a degree historically and culturally specific, much like their situational context and the media through which and in which contemporary discourses of identity find their expression (cf. Benhabib 1992). But there is nothing new in acquiring self-awareness of social identity, the ensuing insecurity in that respect, or in discovering its importance. To suggest otherwise, Jenkins concludes, means to “risk a conceit that consigns most of human experience to a historical anteroom, and to reinvent ethnocentrism and historicism under the reassuring sign of postmodernism’s break with both” (Jenkins 1996: 10; cf. Jenkins 2008: 52-53).

One thing is certain. There is no insouciant, nor perhaps even an uncontradictory thinking of identity – indeed there might have never been – as soon as difference is thought as well. “[W]hen one remains within the established field of identity and difference, one readily becomes a bearer of strategies to protect identity through devaluation of the other; but if one transcends the domestic field of identities through which the other is constituted, one loses the identity and standing needed to communicate with those one sought to inform. Identity and difference are bound together. It may be impossible to reconstitute the relation to the second without confounding the experience

of the first.” (Connolly 1991: 44; cf. Lemke 2008) However, it is possible to critically consider their operative interrelatedness, whether “abstract” or “determined,” speculative or experienced, self-satisfied or resigned – either way – as well as to judge whether it is at all possible or desirable to think outside or beyond that logical, dialectical and (in)differential endeavor already undertaken, but ventured ever anew.

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Predrag Krstić

Kako misliti identitet s razlikom: društvo i teorija

Sažetak

U svom prvom delu ovaj članak detektuje iznenadno naglašeno interesovanje za problem identiteta na prelazu dvadesetog u dvadeset prvi vek i izlaže moderne i postmoderne konceptualizacije kolektivnog identiteta društvenih teoretičara. U svom drugom delu, članak se oslanja na baštinu filozofske spekulacije istog razdoblja. Namera je da se ukaže da mnoge dileme s kojima se suočavaju recentne društvene nauke pri nastojanju da artikulišu mišljenje identiteta i razlike, imaju svoju i dalje merodavnu „predigru“ u tematizaciji motiva njihove neizbežne strukturne i dijalektičke sa-upućenosti koju su formulisali filozofi klasičnog idealizma i „filozofi razlike“. Zaključuje se da od takve „metafizičke“ refleksije društvena teorija može da apstinira samo na vlastitu štetu i da ona ostaje njen nezaobilazni element i kada se ne obavezuje njenim nalazima.

Ključne reči: identitet, razlika, istost, drugost, teorija društva, filozofija