Identity and postmodernism | essay

Critically assess the contention that "…identities are, plural, unstable, situationally enacted, and sites of contestation."

The stability or otherwise of identity has become a major battleground for sociological theorists in recent times. The infamous ' postmodern' turn has rendered identity a deeply problematic phenomenon. In this paper I will investigate the claim that identities are unstable sites of contestation. I will do this by examining the dissolution of identity within postmodern theory before examining both the negative and more importantly, the positive consequences of this. [1] This will enable a deeper understanding of precisely what is meant by this fluid notion of identity, and where possible criticisms and inconsistencies can be located within this theory.

The debate over the stability of identity is one that is inseparably linked to postmodernism. This diverse group of theories centre around, in Lyotard's (1984: xxiv) famous phrase, ' incredulity toward meta-narratives.' [2] Postmodernists maintain that the project of modernity has failed, and that no single source or body of knowledge can legitimise itself as a universal measure of value or identity. This obviously has some profound effects on the ways in which we would normally think about the world. Postmodernism no longer allows us to theorise society into homogenous identities which can then be totalised in a grand-theory or meta-narrative. This is also the case when it comes to the identification of the self. Rather than the self maintaining a stable core of identity, from a postmodern perspective identity is fluid and is dependant upon where the self is historically and culturally situated. As Luntley (1985: 185) notes, this conception of the self threatens the very possibility of self-identity:

The loss of self-identity is threatened because if we situated the self in real historical circumstances, we would situate it in things that are contingent and constantly changing. Therefore, the self would also be constantly changing. It would be in flux and would have no continuing identity.

Once the very identity of the self comes under threat, then so does the possibility of any coherency in social theorising. A postmodern society is one in which the identities of the social actors are undergoing constant transformation. Identity then becomes open to contestation as there is no longer any ultimate referent (truth, science, God etc.) to provide universal legitimation. In Lyotard's terms, the impossibility of a grand or meta-narrative leads to the social being constructed of small narratives, none of which are necessarily more valid than another. Any theory that aims at totalising society should only be seen as one constructed from a particular perspective (e. g. one that still remains in the logic of modernity), rather than a totalising theory as such. Whilst postmodernism can be viewed as liberating and opening up seemingly limitless opportunities for re-theorising society, it does at the same time impose new problems. Firstly, there seems to be an inconsistency in the postmodernist stance, as it could be argued that the theory of the dissolution of meta-narratives is a type of meta-narrative itself. This criticism can also be applied to the postmodernist take on identity, for in arguing that identity is ultimately unstable and fluid postmodernists inadvertently provide a certain rigid structure in which identity operates (i. e. that all identity must be unstable). So whilst postmodernism is liberating on the one hand, on the other it sets limits to the very possibility of any meaningful social theory or practice. This is

exemplified in the disparity between postmodern theorists, some of which view postmodernism as opening up huge opportunities for getting rid of authoritarian grand theories, others view it as essentially debilitating as the only thing that can prevail in postmodern societies is a sense of meaningless flux. Within this disagreement the postmodern analysis of identity remains reasonable intact, both sides of the argument largely accept that identity is fluid and unstable. By analysing this disagreement we can therefore obtain a better understanding of the various aspects of fluid identity.

Jean Baudrillard (1990: 160-164) for example, argues that the dissolution of identity is a process that started in the nineteenth century and was exacerbated in the twentieth. In the postmodern era, historical processes have undermined the stability of identity, so that it becomes impossible to meaningfully theorise about social identity. Rigid identity and meaning are destroyed due to the rise of global capitalism and the demise of the referents from modernity (truth, purpose, meaning and so on). ' Gone are the referentials of production, signification, affect, substance, history, and the whole equation of " real" contents' (Baudrillard 1988: 125). Identity now becomes a radically fluid and empty vessel, which becomes temporarily filled with content that has no foundation or ultimate meaning. Whilst for Baudrillard this cannot be thought of as a particularly positive or negative phenomenon, as ' good' or ' bad' no longer have any real meaning in postmodernity, it does render theoretical and political action largely impotent. [3] This is why in postmodernism we are presented with numerous texts heralding the end of theory, history, meaning and so on. [4] The

dissolution of identity means for many postmodernists that theory and meaningful political action are no longer possible:

The end of history is, alas, also the end of the dustbins of history. There are no longer any dustbins even for disposing of old ideologies, old regimes, old values ... Conclusion: if there are no more dustbins of history, *this is because History itself has become a dustbin* . It has become its own dustbin. Just as the planet itself is becoming its own dustbin. (Baudrillard 1994b: 26)

The negative aspects of the lack of fixity and grounded meaning in identity are thus very evident. Laclau and Mouffe on the other hand, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* , positively embrace the fluidity and instability of identity. Indeed, they argue that the impossibility of the closure of identity is what makes the social possible (1985: 112). Society as such is therefore an impossible object for Laclau and Mouffe, as the field of identities is never fixed, but the continuing attempt to do this renders the possibility of the social. Society resists closure and remains eternally negotiable as the meanings produced to bind the social together are only temporarily fixed at nodal points by articulation (1985: 11). Articulation is where social relations and identities are modified. Many differing types of articulations (political, cultural, scientific an so on) are capable of doing this, but the important thing for Laclau and Mouffe is that no one particular articulation totalises and restricts the ability for other articulations to operate freely. Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 13) argue that their concept of hegemony recognises the plurality of struggles and attempts to engage with it:

The concept of ' hegemony' will emerge precisely in a context dominated by the experience of fragmentation and by the indeterminacy of the articulations between different struggles and subject positions.

Hegemony for Laclau and Mouffe refers to the ' battleground' of identity. As the identity of the social is fluid and open to negotiation, different types of social articulations and struggles will attempt to hegemonise society to gain recognition. While this attempt at hegemony in itself is not a negative practice for Laclau and Mouffe, successfully achieved hegemony is. It is therefore imperative that a strong egalitarian and democratic framework is in operation for this site of social hegemony. The advent of democracy is therefore a pivotal moment in social history. Here Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 186-187) concur with Claude Lefort's analyses of the ' democratic revolution'. Society prior to democracy was thought of as a unified body with power being embodied through that of a sovereign monarch, who was the representative of a god or gods. After the democratic revolution, power becomes an empty space without reference to a transcendental guarantor or a representation of substantial social unity. A split occurs between the instances of power, knowledge, and the foundations of law which are no longer absolute. Without these foundations, no law can be fixed and everything is open to questioning. Society cannot be apprehended or controlled, the people become sovereign but their identity can never be totally given. But once we are in a democratic society, we are in danger of totalitarianism. This is because a purely social power can emerge after democracy has destroyed extra-social powers, which presents its power as total and extracts from itself alone the principles of law and knowledge. As

there are no longer any foundations or a centre to political power, it becomes necessary to bind together political spaces through hegemonic articulations. But these articulations will always remain partial, as they have no ultimate foundation. Any attempt to deny the radically open nature of the social will lead to totalitarianism, be it a politics of the ' left' according to which every antagonism can be eliminated and society rendered transparent, or a fascist authoritarian fixing of the social into a rigid hierarchical state system. The democratic logic of equivalence can therefore be hegemonised into totalitarianism.

The radical openness of identity is therefore impinged with the danger of totalitarianism for Laclau and Mouffe. [5] To avoid this, the diverse and fluid nature of identity should be embraced within an egalitarian and democratic framework, so no particular articulation may hegemonise social identity. This is difficult however as the ultimate lack of closure for identity leads to a necessarily antagonistic network of social relations. Antagonism is caused when a discursive form of one type of identity interrupts another's discursive frame (1985: 154). The inability of a particular identity to successfully assimilate the articulations of another leads to an internal antagonism that becomes the catalyst for a further modification of itself. Hence there is no stable core to any particular identity, identity is always shifting and changing. But this is also how a democratic framework can be constructed. As all identity is open, then democratic and egalitarian ideals can permeate different articulations to avoid totalitarianism:

[I]t is only from the moment when the democratic discourse becomes available to articulate the different forms of resistance to subordination that

the conditions will exist to make possible the struggle against different types of inequality. (1985: 154-155)

The openness of identity, once incorporated into a democratic framework, is therefore a positive and progressive phenomenon for Laclau and Mouffe. The impossibility of totalising society is embraced as an opportunity for new fields of thought to be created, free from the tyranny of authoritarianism. We can therefore see a great disparity between Baudrillard's and Laclau and Mouffe's notions of the openness of identity. Both perspectives fully accept the lack of stability in identity, yet for Baudrillard this leads to sociological and political impotence, whereas for Laclau and Mouffe this is seen as an opportunity for sociological and political creativity and action.

For many theorists however, the apparent differences or similarities between various postmodern theories of unstable identity are merely superficial. [6] They claim that there are deeper problems and inconsistencies within this notion of identity itself. Zizek (2000: 106-107), for example, claims that whilst Laclau and Mouffe are vehemently opposed to all forms of essentialism, and seek to affirm the radical contingency of the political and irreducibility of the social, they nonetheless have to rely on a formal existential a priori, such as ' the logic of hegemony'. In other words, one of the main problems with this type of discourse is that in maintaining that identity and the social is radically open, it has to rely on a certain formal logic. Laclau and Mouffe have to rely on a ' logic of hegemony' as the natural state of identity formation and articulation, as they deny that the fluidity of identity is a historical phenomenon:

Only in contemporary societies is there a generalisation of the hegemonic form of politics, but for this reason we can interrogate the past, and find there inchoate forms of the same processes that are fully visible; and, when they did not occur, understand why things were different. (Laclau 2000: 200)

This proposes that all social identity was always-already the result of hegemonic struggles, whilst it is only in our ' postmodern' world that we can recognise this. So while the maintaining of the openness of identity is a form of anti-essentialism, it is nonetheless only operable within a rigid essentialist framework. Zizek criticises this approach for its lack of historical analysis. For Zizek (2000: 95) it is the process of contemporary global capitalism that has created the conditions for the demise of essentialist politics, and has led us to the ' recognition' of the irreducible plurality of identities. [7] Zizek argues that Laclau and other proponents of this postmodern notion of identity do not analyse the logic that makes this possible, and therefore do not engage with any theoretical confrontation with it. In fact Zizek (1993: 216) and other notable theorists argue that postmodern theories of identity are merely a product of capitalism and late modernity: [8]

Far from containing any kind of subversive potentials, the dispersed, plural constructed subject hailed by postmodern theory simply describes *the form of subjectivity that corresponds to late capitalism* .'

Rather than postmodern identity being a liberating and revolutionary new way of rethinking the social, from this perspective it is merely a reaction of late modernity which fails to seriously engage with the major problematic of our time. It is in this sense that Hardt and Negri (2000: 138) argue that ' the

postmodernist and postcolonialist strategies that appear to be liberatory would not challenge but in fact coincide with and even unwittingly reinforce the new strategies of rule.' Postmodern notions of the fluidity of identity bring us to a political and theoretical impasse. [9] But it could be argued that this is only the case if we accept postmodernism itself as a type of totalising theory. The notion of the fluidity of identity is useful and does open up new avenues of theorising and politicising. But as Zizek and others argue, the social and historical processes that have lead up to this should play a greater role in understanding modern or postmodern identity. Some postmodernists such as Baudrillard accept these historical processes, but insist that they are irreversible under a banner of the end of history. Others such as Laclau and Mouffe insist on the positive aspects of the instability of identity, and indeed even insist that it is unavoidable. But what both these positions share is the unavoidability of groundless identity, and the ultimate impossibility of creating positive content for identity. Laclau and Mouffe may argue that positive identity is possible, within a democratic framework. But the problem of failure remains unavoidable; all identity is either a failed attempt at hegemonising the social, or if successful then it is necessarily totalitarian as it denies the radical openness of identity as such. Even in this positive use of fluid identity, negativity is still very much inscribed into its operation. The lack of fixity in identity does indeed seem to correlate with modern or postmodern subjectivity, as Zizek argues above, but claims that make this a universal and necessary phenomenon are fraught with difficulties.

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Footnotes

[1] As the negative aspects of postmodern identity are clearly evident (lack of meaning, stability and so on), I will therefore concentrate more on the positive aspects of fluid identity to gain greater insight.

[2] See Hardt and Negri (2000: 139-140): ' It is difficult to generalize about the numerous discourses that go under the banner of postmodernism, but most of them draw at least indirectly on Jean-Francois Lyotard's critique of modernist master narratives … [P]ostmodernist theories are defined by many of their proponents as sharing one single common denominator, a generalized attack on the Enlightenment.'

[3] ' The dialectical stage, the critical stage is empty. There is no more stage … – no more stage either of mental or political solidarity.' (Baudrillard: 1990: 164)

[4] See for example Fukuyama (1992)

[5] Here we can see parallels with Lyotard's antagonism toward meta-narratives.

[6] Grillo (1998: 219) interestingly claims that there is another problem with postmodern theory: ' There is an ambiguity in postmodernist writing in the social sciences: are we dealing with an intellectual stance (on language and so forth) or type of culture and society whose features are captured by the phrase ' postmodern'? Or both?' In other words, postmodernists are generally confused in their theorising, as they cannot adequately account for the origins of the dissolution of identity and meaning.

[7] Zizek is not alone in this view. See for example Brockelman (2003: 191): '[A]t the core of all social systems producing identities is a certain structure, a structure that alone makes possible the formation of diacritical or articulated identities.'

[8] See also Hard and Negri (2000: 137-143)

[9] Stuart Sim (1986: 11) for example reproaches postmodernism for its political ineptitude, arguing that antifoundationalist political approaches are ' uncoordinated guerrilla campaigns conducted by alienated solipsists – and one wonders how successful that would be.'