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Stakes in the Field of Power

On the political limitations of lesbian identity discourses

Sabine Hark

[...] the problem is, precisely, to decide if it is actually suitable to place oneself within a „we“ in order to assert the principles one recognizes and the values one accepts; or if it is not, rather, necessary to make the future formation of a „we“ possible, by elaborating the question. Because it seems to me that „we“ must not be previous to the question; it can only be the result - and necessary the temporary result - of the question as it is posed in the new terms in which one formulates it.

Michel Foucault¹

My paper interrogates the political implications of cultural constructions of lesbian-feminist identity in the context of West-German feminist movement, beginning in the early seventies. Following the insights of social theorists Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, feminist political scientist Jane Jenson², and feminist philosopher Judith Butler on the power of discourse and the exercise of power through representation in the political sphere, I am especially concerned with the question of power. The aim of my paper, however, is to reopen the question of identity. How can the relationships between identity, politics, and representation be reworked in a way that destabilizes taken-for-granted notions of identity as the uncritical foundation of politics? Theoretically, there might well be agreement that identity cannot be considered coherent and closed, though the claim that essential identities do exist indeed appears to be imperative for the political practice. In the following pages I want to question the seemingly undebatable necessity of essential, coherent identities in the field of the political.

Stakes in the field of power

The definition and deployment of collective identities is a common feature of all social movements. To speak 'in behalf of' or 'in the name of someone', i.e., the „appropriate“ political representation of identity or the „objective interests“ of a group, class, gender, or sexuality is the purpose and goal of politics. The political field can be understood as a site of competition for power in which identities serve as the *means* of politics, since identities are *used* in pursuing a politics of identity.³ „Knowledge of the social world and, more precisely, the

categories which make it possible, are the stakes *par excellence* of the political struggle, a struggle which is inseparably theoretical and practical, over the power of preserving or transforming the social world by preserving or transforming the categories of perception of that world" (Bourdieu 1991a: 236). Thus, the power to create groups through naming is political power *par excellence*. Hardly a political movement exists that does not operate by appealing to the supposedly common identity of its members, and at the same time attempting to subject these individuals to this identity by means of a variety of social and discursive practices. It is the knowledge relevant to identities that must continually be reproduced socially and politically. Identities are thus not descriptive of essential differences between individuals, independent of political mobilization, but the fragile and heterogeneous stakes in the struggle for cultural and political hegemony. They are products of an on-going contradictory contestation over the content of these identities.⁴

In the „descriptivist ideal“ (Butler), however, identity is perceived as the representation of an authentic essence - even if this essence is for example culturally or economically defined -, that needs only to be brought to representation. In other words, it is presumed that the content of the economic, social, political, cultural or personal identities of those subsumed under a signifier of identity, e.g. /lesbian/, can not only be completely represented by the sign (Darstellung/description), but also legitimately politically be represented through the sign (Vertretung/embodiment/proxy). Here we encounter the central tension within the concept of representation: the complex interplay of two aspects of representation, that is, representation as description (Darstellung) and representation as embodiment or proxy (Vertretung). Bourdieu refers to that as the „original circle of representation“, that is, it is not only the group that creates the person who speaks in its place and in its name - „it is just as true to say that it is the spokesperson who creates the group“ (1991c: 204). Thus, the subject who is supposedly only being represented (in the strict sense of Darstellung) by the signifier of identity, exists only through the act of representation (in the sense of embodiment) itself; in effect, embodiment produces the very content of identities which the „professionals“ (Bourdieu) of the group then claim to only have described. Thus, the „descriptivist ideal“ works with a double illusion. It not only creates the expectation that a full and final description is possible but also that the political field can be once and for all exhausted, that the 'end of history' is possible: The description is removed from its concrete historical context and in turn, comes to „embody“ that which it supposedly „really is“. In other words, the struggle for hegemony, or rather the struggle for the power to assert one's own meaning over or against that of others becomes naturalized and history is rewritten to be „that which it always already was“. Representation must therefore be seen as a tendenciously totalizing act. For the act of representation as embodiment aspires to the closure of potential fields of meaning and posits coherence in the essentially open and precarious field of the political. „A symbolic power is a power which presupposes recognition, that is, *misrecognition of the violence* that is exercised through it“, argues Pierre Bourdieu in that regard

(1991c: 209). A violence, says Butler, that „is at once performed and erased by a description that claims finality and all-inclusiveness.“ (1993: 221)

Analyzing power in social movements

From a sociological perspective it seems more productive to focus on the social processes in which identities are constructed. For it is only through the process of mobilization that collective identities exist. Further, if these processes necessarily involve the exercise of power then it seems necessary to scrutinize the production of power relations within social movements. For, according to Foucault⁵, power should not be seen as property, to be possessed by individuals or groups. Rather, Foucault conceives of modern power as a dense and complex net of relations woven both between and within different social spheres, among others in social movements. The history of lesbian-feminism can thus be reread as a series of reconstructions of identity in which not only existing structural and symbolic power relations are called into question but new power relations are constructed.

According to Jane Jenson (1992), three methodological innovations are central to analyzing the mobilization of identities in the realm of the political: 1. Political identities are constructed in the process of collective action. They are neither bodily defined nor dependent on structural derivation alone.⁶ 2. The name a movement chooses is of central strategic importance for its success. At the same time the strategic choice of the name expresses self-perception and style. 3. The practice of „naming“ follows from a struggle over meaning which contributes to the construction of the collective identity of a group. The construction of political identities can thus be conceived as a two-fold process, that is, they are not only socio-culturally constructed but politically constructive. Observing that the „construction of a shared collective identity involves the exercise of power“ Jenson sets her focus directly on the question of power in movement policy and analysis (1992: 1). Thus, the „struggle over meaning“ (of the signifier /lesbian/) is linked with structurally defined power relations as well as power relations which are (or potentially can be) constructed through the process itself.⁷

By neglecting the productive side of this process, that is, the construction of (potentially) new power structures both in society and within the lesbian-feminist movement, lesbian-feminist discourses of identity tend to reify categories of identity, thus foreclosing the possibility of new lesbian subject-positions and political agency. To counter-act this reification Judith Butler argues for a notion of discourse „as complex and convergent chains in which 'effects' are vectors of power. In this sense, what is constituted in discourse is not fixed in or by discourse, but becomes the *condition and occasion for further action*.“ (1993: 187). Thus, to the extent that lesbian-feminist discourses understand identity-claims *only* as rallying points for political mobilization, without taking into account that the effects produced in and through these discourses function as

„vectors of power“, lesbian-feminist politics fail to provide a vision of political agency that is consonant with a notion of radical democracy.

In the trap of one's own radicalism

In the early 1970s, lesbians and straight women in Germany began a public discourse on lesbianism, which only became part of women's political identities as a result of this public discourse itself. In this discourse, lesbianism continues to serve as a „magical sign“ (Katie King) of feminism. The magic of the sign exists in the promise of „home“, that is, membership in a collective and an ordering of the social world. The sign /lesbian/ as signifier provides information about who belongs and who doesn't; about those who have the right to call themselves feminists. „The changing connotations of the label 'female identity' represent the stakes of the struggle to form the collective 'woman'“ (Landweer 1990: 24). Thus, identity functions not only as the pre-requisite of politics but as its tool, regulating questions of 'true' membership, of inclusion and exclusion.

Lesbian identity can be reconstructed as one stake in the formation of the collective 'woman'. One of the most provocative formulations of this issue is the slogan attributed to Ti-Grace Atkinson: „Feminism is the theory, lesbianism its practice.“ This slogan has been seen as the privileging of lesbianism as an avant-garde practice of feminism. Atkinson's position, however, was quite to the contrary. She conceived of feminism as political theory and lesbianism as the personal sexual preference of particular women. The original version of her statement was presented in the context of her 1970 speech on lesbianism and feminism at the New York chapter of the „Daughters of Bilitis“, a US-national gay women's organization. It read: „Feminism is a theory; lesbianism is a practice.“ In her 1971 publication on the same topic, Anne Koedt quotes this same statement, but in a self-edited form. Atkinson's statement now reads: „Feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice.“ The distinction between feminists and lesbians has been narrowed by means of a linguistic shift to the definitive article „the“. Nevertheless, lesbians have yet to establish themselves as the avant-garde of the feminist movement. It is this edited version of Atkinson's statement which found its way into the German women's movement through an anthology of texts from the US-American women's movement entitled „Frauen gemeinsam sind stark“. It is in turn Koedt's version of Atkinson's statement that was further adopted and revised as the motto of the 1974 „Lesbenpflingsttreffen“ in Berlin: „Feminismus die Theorie, Lesbischsein die Praxis?“. The question mark contained within this motto implies that it remains to be seen which role lesbians should play in feminism, and above all, what place they see for themselves therein. But this is a situation that will soon change. For the separating semi-colon and the simple ordering implicit in Atkinson's use of the indefinite article „a“ in the original version of her statement experience a transformation. They become a binding „and“/“und“ and a definite (and definitive!) „the“. The effect of this transformation is the

production of a causal relationship: lesbianism is born the revolutionary practice of feminism: Feminismus ist die Theorie und Lesbianismus seine Praxis“ („Feminism is the theory and lesbianism its practice“.) This grammatical elision results in a semantic shift. The German lesbian-feminist recipients of Atkinson's statement (who were not its original audience) had already created their history for which this statement would be adapted in order to adopt it as a banner for the lesbian movement, as the „magical sign“ of feminism, to „go down in history“ and finally, to in turn be „rediscovered“ within this history. In the subsequent history of the lesbian feminist movement, Atkinson's statement developed into a feminist emblem with diametrically shifting meanings; its effects were simultaneously mobilizing and terrorizing.

In the beginning of lesbian-feminism in Germany, the constructionist perspective was taken very seriously by lesbians. Indeed they understood it quite literally as trying to reconstruct lesbian life. By defining lesbianism as political, lesbian-feminists shifted questions of sexual orientation and identity from the discursive fields of nature and sexology onto the field of politics. The meaning of lesbianism, as a sexual „disposition“ that dominated both public opinion and sexology in the early 1970's and was articulated politically in the form of demands for equal rights, was radically called into question by the idea of „political lesbianism“. In fact, not only did this result in the creation of a new social movement, but also the development of individual lifestyles. The recoding of identities as a conscious act of construction is at that point still present in this process of discursive displacement. Yet in the end, I will argue that lesbians have failed to see the constructed, fragile, and contingent 'nature' of their own collective self-conceptions. For even political lesbianism does not exist outside of the field of power. Even the strategically intended deployment of identities produces effects that exceed the original emancipatory or revolutionary intentions of political movements.

Lena Laps's „radical present vision of lesbian identity“ heralds a new phase in the mobilization of lesbian political identity. But this is only a temporary suspension of this discourse. Her statement: „We are the lesbians we have been waiting for“ (1990: 22) announces the fulfillment of the discourse of political lesbianism. Liberation from the „heteropatriarchy“ appeared to have been successful and the realm of freedom has been attained. An end, however, which on the one hand, is still very close to the beginnings of the emergence of lesbians on the political scene in the early Seventies, yet on the other marks a radical shift in focus. For lesbianism continues to be defined as the most radical version of a feminist life-style. However, if in 1974 any woman could be a lesbian, a radically constructivist perspective, which transformed Simone de Beauvoir's dictum „One is not born, but becomes a woman“ into its lesbian-existentialist counterpart: 'One is not born, but becomes a lesbian', today we know exactly who belongs to that name: „We are the lesbians, we have been waiting for.“ Hence, liberation from „heteropatriarchy“ ends in a self-chosen identity-ghetto:

„This movement worked on behalf of all women. ... If we are lesbian feminists, we are radically different from what the hetero-society wants us to be.

... If we are lesbian feminists, we feel and act on behalf of women as women. ... We feel and act for all women because we are women, and even if we were the last ones to profess this, we would still be there for women. ... Lesbian feminism is a way of life, a way of living for our deepest Selves and for other women.“ (Raymond 1989: 149ff)

This self-assurance represents the attainment of the tautological conclusion of the concept of identity as the rallying point for political mobilization. That which had been born as a signal for revolution took up a position in the field of power. When in lesbian identity politics the category of the lesbian is understood as the „other“, the extreme opposite of heterosexuality, then heterosexuality as an institution, as the constitutive power of the heterosexual matrix, loses its position as political and analytical focus. Even in the most radical rejections of heterosexuality as a totalitarian constraint, it is of course contained within the notion of heterosexuality and simply follows the „course of the general deployment of sexuality“ (Foucault). „We cannot believe that one says no to power by saying yes to sex,“ (Foucault 1977: 187). Alternatively according to Lacan, both legitimate heterosexuality and illegitimate homosexuality are constituted in and through the law. Both are chronological and ontological repercussions of the law, and even the illusion of sexuality „before the law“ is constituted by the law. Lesbian identity politics thus contributes to the naturalization of a context of power which it otherwise denounces and fights with all its strength. The discursive production of a politicized lesbian identity which suggests an „outside“ of power, however, continues to exist within the matrix of heterosexuality, and in this way underestimating its constitutive character.

Here the boundaries of a politics of representation which require that a discrete subject exists „before the law“ become visible. On the other hand, if we pursue Joan Scott's definition of politics as a „struggle over meanings“, that is „the process by which plays of power and knowledge constitute identity“ (Scott 1988: 5), then we must also ask how lesbian-feminism itself has participated in this process. Is it not the subject – and thus also the identity of this subject – that the lesbian movement claims to represent that is actually created by the movement in the first place? The attempt to take one's place permanently in a system of cultural representation also produces effects of power that radically question the articulated „project of emancipation“. Political representation is not a politically innocent, simple form of reference. Rather, „the sign creates the thing signified, the signifier is identified with the thing signified, which would not exist without it, and which can be reduced to it. The signifier is not only that which expresses and represents the signified group: it is that which signifies to it that it exists, that which has the power to call into visible existence, by mobilizing it, the group that it signifies“ (Bourdieu 1991a: 206f).

Political action is suspended when the tension between contingency and reality is destroyed, when particular forms of meaning are inadvertently excluded and the „things signified“ are fixed in positions of power – in other words, when a „we“ claims to speak to and represent „everyone“ when they say „we“. If a certain configuration of lesbian identity strives to take „the place of 'the

real“ and consolidates and augments its hegemony through that self-naturalization (Butler 1990: 33), the result is that lesbian identity is emptied of all revolutionary practice and left a petrified, reified, politically paralyzing shell. Rather than offensively incorporating the contingency of *any* historically specific, cultural construction of lesbian identity in politics, lesbians have erected a well-secured fence around this particular construction, thereby foreclosing the heterogeneity of identity constructions: „And those,“ who do not think like us, „they’re not lesbian feminists.“ (Raymond 1989: 155).

Hence, the various essentialist practices of sexology, neuro-psychology, neuro-biology, of genetics, psychoanalysis, and so on, which locate the origin of homosexuality either in sexual drives, hormones, the size of the hypothalamus, in the genetic code, or in ‘gender inversion’ are replaced by an essentialist political practice. The attempt to define the essence of lesbian identity or subjectivity thus proves to be an important component in normalizing gender divisions and heterosexuality.

Following Lacan, Slavoj Žižek (1993) underscores the immanently authoritarian character of the process of fixation of identity. According to Žižek, identity will always become authoritarian if one ignores that identity is nothing more than the inscription of difference, the expression of lack. Žižek continues that it is not accidental that the most significant examples for the authority of identities are *tautologies* (101); that is, predications that imply the identity of a subject with itself: „*We* are the lesbians *we* have been waiting for“.

This scenario leads above all to one question, namely, if a new form of politics emerges, would political discourse no longer be limited to identity as its common ground? If, however, as Foucault has shown, juridical systems of power *produce* the very subjects they subsequently come to represent⁸, and we cannot avoid this mechanism, how can we then appeal to the identities produced in this manner without reifying them once again in political discourse? If we indeed cannot avoid this „error of identity“ (Spivak), what form would alternative political practices take; i.e., forms of political practice which accept and tolerate the tension between the politically necessary yet temporary fixing of identity and its principle contingency or arbitrariness, instead of closing the field of meaning through homogenizing, hegemonial acts?

Political practices as Practices of Performativity

If we conceive of identity as an „active construct“ (de Lauretis) that is created by means of discursive and socio-political practices, and if knowledge of its own contingency is embedded in the mechanisms of this process, then a notion of political agency can be developed which places the political sphere of action within this very structure. Judith Butler argues that „construction is not opposed to agency, it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible“ (Butler 1990: 147). If we also affirm a psychoanalytically informed notion of identity in which identity is never

stable, but rather always contingent, unstable, potentially disruptive, estranged and incoherent, then in the end this could generate a productive form of identity politics, one whose goal is not the erasure of differences and inconsistencies or the production of stable political subjects.

If that „which power does“ is essentially to chain each and every individual to an identity, whereby power is the precondition for society and self, then the horizon of political emancipation and freedom must be redefined. The core of such a conception of emancipation would no longer be „liberation from“ power, but „refusal“ of that which we have become and the construction of new identities. „We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries“ (Foucault 1982: 216). Foucault's statement refers to a dimension of subjectivity derived from power and knowledge, yet not dependent on them. However, this should not be confused with voluntary acts of identity in which we simply define ourselves as someone else. Quite the contrary. Foucault's notion of subjectivity requires a critical genealogy of that which we have become as well as temporary affirmation of the construct which has emerged. „Not only do we have to defend ourselves, but we have to affirm ourselves, not only affirm ourselves as an identity but as a creative force.“ (Foucault 1984b: 27)

If identity is never complete and fixed permanently, then representation of identities is not defined and their interests in the political sphere. Instead, the political exists in constantly redefining these identities. The history of the subject is the history of its identifications and there is no such thing as a fixed identity beyond these identifications. This implies a two-fold movement: On the one hand a movement of decentering which seeks to avoid fixing a set of positions around a preconstituted point and, on the other hand, the institutionalization of nodal points, that is, *partial fixation* which limits and temporarily stops the flow of connotations, as a consequence of this essential nonfixation. The meaning of social identity appears to be continually postponed, delayed: The moment of the „final seam“ (Laclau/Mouffe) never comes. It is for this reason that we cannot speak of a social identity that is totally protected from a discursive outside that changes its forms and prevents its final seams from ever being sewn. In this way, identities lose their compulsory character and any discursive fixation becomes metaphoric, the first metaphor actually being the literalness itself. Such a conception of identity is the prerequisite for a *performative* political practice that affirms that the categories of identity are non-referential terms and can never be descriptive. „In this sense“, Butler argues, „what is lamented as disunity and factionalization from the perspective informed by the descriptivist ideal is *affirmed* by the anti-descriptivist perspective as the open and democratizing potential of the category.“ (Butler 1993: 221)

In this sense, lesbian identity would not be the „totally different other“ as compared to heterosexuality, but a position from which hegemonial discourses could be challenged and read against the grain. Thus, lesbianism would then be understood as a complex metaphor, a place from which to speak instead of a simple way of being – „not an identity with predictable content constituting a

total political and self-identification“ (Bidddy Martin). By being „disloyal to the phallogocratic reality“ (Marilyn Frye), it would be a practice which would make the surplus of heterosexual discourse – i.e., that of the excluded subject forms – intelligible, extending the boundaries of the cultural matrix via a process of perpetual self-deplacement, without placing itself in the „position of the real“. In this regard, the old saying „Feminism is the theory and lesbianism its practice“ might come in handy once again.

Anmerkungen

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- 1 Michel Foucault, *Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations: An Interview with Michel Foucault*, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, New York: Pantheon, 1984a, 385.
- 2 I am thankful to Antje Wiener who introduced me to the work of Jane Jenson.
- 3 Bourdieu argues: „What is at stake ... is the power of imposing a vision of the divisions of the social world through principles of di-vision which, when they are imposed on a whole group, establish meaning and a consensus about meaning, and in particular about the identity and unity of the group, which creates the reality of the unity and the identity of the group.“ (1991b: 221)
- 4 In his book *Nomads of the Present* Alberto Melucci argues in that regard for a de-ontologization of social movements. (1989: 42ff). If one conceives of social actors or movements as a „unified empirical datum“ (18), this would ultimately lead to their reification: „the collective reality is seen to exist as a thing. This process of reification of 'collective action' transforms social action into an introvertible fact, a given that does not merit further investigation.“
- 5 See especially Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1979; *History of Sexuality*. Vol. I: An Introduction. New York: Vintage, 1980
- 6 Jenson argues „... that the same dimension - e.g. sex, colour, work - may generate a variety of identities. ... identities are social constructions and can only be read off the lived experience, including discursive practice, of actors.“ (1992: 4)
- 7 Jenson writes, „[c]hoices are never unconstrained, of course. They are made in particular structural and institutional contexts, traversed by relations of power. The power of dominant groups and institutions is a limit on the imagining of subordinate communities. Yet, subordinate groups are never without power.“ (1992: 1)
- 8 See Michel Foucault, „Right to Death and Power over Life“, in *The History of Sexuality*, *ibid.*

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