Community, Communication and Identity Politics

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Abstract

This paper argues, firstly, that political theories and ideologies tend to revolve around a conceptualisation of community that they simultaneously displace to a location external to political activism itself and, secondly, that they are underpinned by a particular, and related, concept of communication. This has shaped modern politics and still shapes contemporary manifestations of ‘identity politics’ which presuppose the presence of some kind of communal ‘identity’ around which (or in the name of which) a particular politics is asserted as well as those theories that prioritise communication in the search for justice. The paper explores these arguments and suggests some of their problematic aspects while raising some questions about identity politics.
Community Communication and Identity Politics

Introduction

Communality or community are fundamental terms or concepts of political thought, ideology and practice. Indeed, there are few concepts that can surpass ‘community’ for their ubiquity in such discourse whether deployed in the abstract (in the form of general conceptualisations of the idea of community or the basis to solidarity) or the concrete (specifications regarding particular communities such as a nation or people of some sort and the features necessary for its functioning). Politicians, activists and spokespersons may claim to articulate the feelings of ‘the community’ and to mobilise action around a concept of communality be it rooted in an ethnic group or a social class, a particular gender and so on. When political theorists or ideologists speak of ‘the people’, ‘the class’, ‘the nation’ and so forth, they mobilise a concept of community and with it they impute an identity.

Politics is concerned with relationships – between individuals, between individuals and society or between societies. As such, ‘communality’ and ‘solidarity’ inescapably form a central concern. We might say that political thinking is concerned with the meaning of ‘we’. It does not ask ‘what am I’ but ‘who are we’, ‘what is ‘we’ or ‘how should “I” relate to “we”?’. In so doing it organises or specifies a way of conceiving ‘we’ and may even attempt to enact it. Politics is precisely this practice.

But we have not, and do not, all think of this ‘we’ in the same way. Not only do we disagree about who counts as we or what we are like but the manner in which ‘we’ is envisaged, and the status it is afforded, vary. However, there is an underlying structure to many of the ways in which community and identity have been conceived
politically. Not in the sense of an underlying truth or all-determining structure but rather a history, perhaps more properly a tradition, of such thought, the legacy of which has contributed to current forms of identity politics and theories about, or for, them. Part of this tradition entails the placing of community in a very special relationship to political life and regarding it as necessary to ground the very ideas of justice and right. Despite efforts, even avowedly post-metaphysical or post-conventional approaches to politics and political theory are not unaffected by this tradition.

A central aspect here is the use of concepts of communication in explicating the meaning and functioning of community. This has had an effect upon (and been effected by) not only political theories but also ideologists, activists and even forms of state and government. It is this tradition that we will consider in this paper. But, in order to situate this consideration, we will begin with a more general theorisation.

**Theoretical Considerations**

Articulations of community are also articulations of an identity. ‘Identity-claims’ are only political in as much as they are linked to this communal dimension – which is to say, in as much as they attempt to pertain to some form of universality (implied if not specified in such discourse).

For example, one aspect of my life experience which might form a part of my identity would be my employment. But I may be conscious of this in as much as it makes me a ‘worker’ or ‘wage-slave’, a ‘professional’ (perhaps even a ‘professional intellectual’), an ‘academic;’, a university worker or, more specifically, a political
theorist. I may even strongly understand myself in terms of my membership of the University of Wales Swansea.

These are not necessarily mutually exclusive options but they could contradict and they differ greatly in scale. Because they are not mutually exclusive I may, at different moments and in different contexts, feel certain of them most strongly. We could explain this process through fairly straightforward sociological analysis or we could, for normative purposes, interpret it as evidence of the autonomy with which we engage in processes of identification and self-fulfilment.¹ But neither of these would inform us greatly about the politics of identity. For while, undoubtedly, my choice or experience of these identities, is thoroughly social in its conditioning and in its possibility (not to mention the fundamental sense in which relations of power are at work within or through it) there is nothing necessarily or especially political about it.

My choice would only be a political identity when experienced as part of a wider collective formulation in which the interests deriving from that identity, or the expression of it, are understood as simultaneously involving the interests and expressions of others understood to share the same identity. Attempts to find a universality to the political dimension of the social are dependent on the articulation of a universalisable identity claim - the universality of community.²

¹ One of the major determinants here would be the effective and understood presence of some sort of threat. If the University of Wales Swansea were threatened with closure then I would very probably come to see this as a threat to my identity and develop a sense of solidarity with my co-workers. But there is no guarantee that this would happen (and I may interpret it as a specific threat against my university or as part of a general threat to Higher Education or I may ignore it and seek employment in banking). The presence of such a threat (objective as it may be) would not necessarily lead to a particular political identity but it would be a necessary condition. There is not space here to fully discuss these issues but see, for example, William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of a Political Paradox.*

² The use of the term ‘universality’ in this context requires clarification. The claim is not that all identity claims desire to be applicable to all people at all times. Some might, but for many forms of contemporary identity politics this is clearly not the case. Rather, my argument is that identity claims desire to be universally applicable (in all circumstances and at all times) to all those who can be understood as sharing in that identity – for example, that all women share some essential feature or interest or that all Europeans are part of a trans-historical cultural unity. There are, however, some forms of identity politics that not only desire to be universal in the fuller sense but regard this as
This means that my political identity is never simply ‘mine’ (always ‘ours’) and also never a simple matter of my choice. It is also a matter of ‘their’ choice (perhaps I should say ‘its’) to have me as one of the ‘we’. In this sense my political identity is also a moment of subject formation in which ‘I’ come into being, interpellated under the sign of a collective identity defined by the aspects of subjectivity it causes me to understand myself as possessing. This ‘interpellation’, which Althusser described in terms of a ‘calling’ or ‘hailing’, is like the outcome of a rhetorical act of persuasion in response to which I recognise myself just as it recognises me.

This is not to suggest that the process of political identity formation is not thoroughly dependent on all the processes analysed by material political sociology (distribution of power, social structure, the organisation of labour, ideological apparatuses etc.) in ways that make some forms of identity more successful than others, nor that it is anything other than conjunctural. It is only to stress the necessity of this moment if an identity is to be experienced as related to a universal of some sort and consequently the significance of rhetoric and communication. From both of these aspects certain problems derive.

The formation of a common ‘we’, the articulation of the communal identity, must also specify the particularity that is to be regarded as achieving this

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intrinsic to their political nature (primarily humanist Liberalism which is considered below). That said, the extent to which it is possible for such an implicit universality to be articulated with an identity claim is not the same in all cases and there are good reasons to suspect that it is markedly harder to animate a sense of the community of women, for example, than it is to animate a such a sense around a concept of nation. This is not to say that there cannot be solidarity between women but rather that the formation of a specific community around this gender category is not possible because gender differentiation holds such a foundational position for political community that such a politics is always already a re-writing of community as such rather than a mere rival or amendment to it. On this point see Balibar, 1995b, p. 67-8.
universality.\(^3\) That particularity will always thus be lost because of the necessary abstraction involved in the declaration of such a universal. That is to say, the specificity of the one must be sacrificed in order to maintain and assert the specificity of the many (sometimes a political necessity but prone to lead to the kind of splintering that commonly occurs within radical identity-based political movements). If I identify as ‘worker’ elements of my particularity as a worker (perhaps my exact profession, what I’d rather do, my non-work interests or important things like my gender or race) must be sidelined, suppressed or understood in terms of (and subordinate to) my identity as worker. The over-stressing of this difference would fracture the universality of the category of worker and thus must be limited.\(^4\)

A history of political thinking in terms of attempts to resolve this paradox and produce a truly universal community also able to express the particularity of its subjects could be constructed. Some, of course, have simply discounted or ignored differences. Forms of revolutionary socialism or millenarianism, as well as reactionary and straightforwardly religious ideologies, have attempted to bridge the gap through uniting the particular with the universal in the name of something higher or deeper. But it is proceduralist liberalism that appears to be the telos of our political history since it aims to establish a universal basis to the solidarity of humanity without prescribing anything pertaining to the particular embodiments of that universality, indeed claiming not to posit any such substantive.\(^5\) According to the ideals of liberalism my identity will be the outcome of my free choice in a free polity, the state

\(^3\) We are leaving out of the account the importance of the construction of an ‘enemy’, ‘threat’ or ‘other’ in the securing of such a communal identity. There simply is not space to properly consider this but see, in addition to Connolly, Laclau, 1992, especially the essay by Zizek.

\(^4\) The attempt to find a way of articulating struggles together into a universality without losing a sense of the specificity of the particular elements of that universality has been, for a long time, the holy-grail of radical and emancipatory ‘left’ politics as well as the keystone for criticism of them.

\(^5\) This is seen by many to be the great virtue of the Rawlsian project – others see this as the great weakness.
will have nothing to do with it, and there need be no contradiction in my exercising the various aspects of my identity. Should contradictions or conflicts emerge we can go to court and talk it out. But in order to avoid obviously positing an underlying communal identity liberalism has been forced to think harder and to establish ways in which the state can be seen as identity neutral and its justification as independent of any claims relating to the nature of the community or communities. Here liberal thought (and its variants of communitarianism and discourse ethics) has found itself part of the tradition it derives from. It does assert a form of solidarity, based on communication, into which it seeks to interpellate liberal citizens as the sort of people who can and want to choose their identity and do need to experience it as part of a political collectivity. Since I have made a choice I should be able to provide reasons and justifications for it and it is this capacity to have reasons and justifications that gives me the identity of member of the community of liberal humanity.

But this staging of a potentially universalisable ‘we’, involves a paradoxical ‘doubling’ of the notion of ‘the political’. In order for there to be an identity politics or a politics centred on identity there must first be an identity that is politicised. This means that the political act of instituting a collective identity occurs prior to there being a politics of identity. But what, then, is the political status of this act of institution if it makes possible the very politics of identity to which it is central? This troublesome question (which demands that the very notion of ‘being-political’ be opened up) is consequently ‘repressed’ so that the identity can be understood as having already existed before or outside of the advent of politics as such. The universal community is thus comprehended as the beginning of politics and not its

This conjoining of Rawlsianism with communitarianism and Habermasian discourse ethics is clearly tendentious. In part this paper touches on the reasons why they can be linked in this way. But I think it is clear that in terms of the problems to which they address themselves these are all clearly components of the ‘liberal tradition’ – the neutrality of the state, the development of autonomy, the maintenance of principles of right and justice.
outcome. What has to be achieved is presumed to already exist even if it is not yet recognised by everyone. Because there is a universality to community and identity there can be a politics through which the constituent elements of that universality address themselves and agree on common courses of action. As a result the task of critical political philosophy is understood as that of ensuring that we have correctly understood this commonality and do not undertake any actions that contravene or undermine it. In as much as there are things-to-be-achieved by politics these are no more than the full recognition of what is already there and implicit in our actions – the purpose of politics is thus to abolish itself by bringing itself into harmony with the very facts that made it possible in the first place. In other words the goal of politics is to forge the coincidence of essence and existence that is implicit in the very possibility of there being politics in the first place, which is also to say that the goal of politics is to represent and express a full identity rather than create one. This generates an ambivalence in political thinking about the source of the political and its role in relation to the identity of community – does it come before or after it? How can it seek to instantiate that which made it possible in the first place? It is tempting to suggest that the classic texts of political thought are a series of differing responses to this question but we must not lose sight of the fact that this ambivalence, and the questions it forces us to pose, do not take a unified form in the history of political thinking. They undergo a particularly significant reversal as a result of ‘modernity’.

The latter conception has more affinity to Republican conceptions of politics than liberal ones. However, it should be stressed that the division here is not secure. Kantian republicanism has passed down into, for example, Rawlsian thinking and is most clear in those moments where the efforts of the state to bring about the kind of citizen suited to life in a Rawlsian republic are explored. Similarly, in Habermas stress is placed on the necessity of the constitution generating a shared and active consent around it. In this sense both thinkers are ‘creating’ a political identity though this moment is submerged within their arguments. The ‘speech’ acts of political theory are themselves moments when a communality is staged be it in the form of the community envisaged or implied by the theory but also in the way in which a text invites readers to share its presuppositions. As a result, undoubtedly, there are strong communities of Habermasians and Rawlsians – intellectuals being at least (if not more) cultic as everybody else.
Community is the stage onto which the universality of politico-ethical projects is paraded. But this takes different (and specific) forms. Myths of autochthony in democratic classical Athens, Roman legends of the founding of the Republic and the brotherhood of all Christendom which, in its turn, offered a water on which politics could walk. These forms have left their traces and their patterns are sometimes repeated but ‘modernity’ (perhaps it is defined by this) refuses such supernatural foundations and thinks itself capable of creating a community at the same time as fragmenting still further the unity that, even between the active citizens of the self-sufficient city-states, had to be imagined. But where the classical and Christian question was something like ‘how can we be true to the identity we believe ourselves to have?’ modernity transforms this into the question of communal and political identity ‘as such’. It seeks to escape, for example, by imagining the establishment of concrete universality in the form of the community of all humanity, in the case of cosmopolitan liberalism, or the constitution of the national state, in the case of varied forms of romantic political philosophy. Both of these make the role of the state central and seek to resolve the paradox from within, or through, its mechanisms.

My argument may be put like this. Political theory or political ideology always proposes or implies a social theory of some kind. It is not concerned simply with the physical presence of community or the features necessary for its taking particular forms (though these certainly form a part of many political discourses from Plato’s ideal city to Rousseau’s sovereign republic) but with how community is to be understood and valued, how its relationship to the overall understanding of social life is to be thought and, ultimately, with a more general conceptualisation of the experience of collectivity - of ways of being together - and the political consequences or necessities derived from all this. Discourses of ‘community’ define ways of
comprehending our social relationships and of imagining how we are connected to each other, shaping our understanding of the social world and participating in the process of making it meaningful. Political theories, acts and ideologies ‘stage’ particular versions of communality, constituting a form of community upon which they then act and from which forms of legitimate state are believed to be derivable. But they then act as if that communal identity is anything other than something imputed by the theory or ideology and regard it as something to which they defer.

Such constructions of community simultaneously define their subjects – who they are, who is and is not to be counted as a member - and what they are to be like. Prescribing subjectivity or identity and offering a grounding for theoretical-ideological claims, concepts of community place politics within a determinate and limited location. Conceiving of ‘we’ through the terms of community entails a presupposition of organisation – an already-existing set of bonds that are prior to the thinking of politics even if they are yet-to-be-realised in the concrete, and while it allows dispute as to the nature of the people it does so only within the confines of the communal bloc.

As a straightforward example consider an ideology such as Conservatism which functions by positing the national community in order to demonstrate the inflexibility of the status quo (its fundamental aversion to the dictates of liberal reason) or those forms of socialism (understood by Marx as ‘utopian’) that proceed by positing the natural solidarity and community of ‘the class’ or of ‘all mankind’. In both cases, the community is imagined as indicative of a spontaneous, ‘given’, order that forms the foundation to our political thinking – its natural basis without which we cannot even begin to think politics, justice or peace. But if these ideologies are to be consistent with themselves they have to explain why they have any political role to
perform. After all, if everything flows from the natural basis to our community of prejudice or our innate solidaristic instincts then why do we need politics (and it is noticeable that at their extremes both of these ideologies tend towards versions of anarchism, predicated as they are on belief in natural and spontaneous forms of association). Hence they must posit something that prevents this natural sociality from coming into being. In the case of Conservatism, commonly, this is often original sin or hubristic rationalism (which, for this ideology, are essentially the same charge). Because ‘man’ is not God and is prone to frailty and fallibility, but thinks himself more capable than he really is, evils follow. This sinfulness of hubris may be understood by conservatism to be manifested in a particular ideology, such as socialism, or an ethnic group to which the Conservative refuses to accommodate. These are understood as attempts to reinvent the natural community thus imposing upon it forms of organisation or kinds of identity that are alien to it. The task of conservative politics is then clear – it has the role of ensuring that the community is defended from these sorts of imposition. It must have the recognised authority to do so and the necessary independence from society but its orientation must always be, as it were, backwards – protecting and defending that which is. This is the conservative understanding of statecraft.

For humanistic and utopian forms of socialism the blockage to the full expression of communal identity is conceived of as individualised forms of greed or that form of economy that turns the scarcity of resources into a social system that pits people against one another. Once again the task of politics is clear – to eradicate the evils of selfish individualism and economic competition and to end scarcity so that the natural community of humankind can come to express itself fully. The ultimate goal
of politics is to abolish itself, along with the state, as anything other than a merely
administrative mechanism and to set the community free.

Within both ideologies we can see two moments to their thinking of politics.
There is the moment of ‘foundation’, which involves the political act instituting the
communal horizon (the call to the nation or the class to recognise itself as such) and
then the politics that takes up its place within it. The former is an act of ontological
initiation, a statement on the nature of being or, more properly, of ‘being-with’, while
the latter concerns itself with the mechanisms, procedures and policies by which that
horizon will be maintained, sustained and managed or by which it will come to know
itself better. The former makes the latter possible while the latter must suppress the
politicality of the act by which it was made possible. Thus each ideology can believe
itself to be trying only to bring about that which already was.

Contemporary forms of identity politics – be they ‘resurgent’ ethnic
nationalisms, religious revivals or movements built around race or sexuality – repeat
this formulation. If they do not, in all instances, aim to constitute a specific
community that may then be called to action then they seek to assert their proper
inclusion into the community by stressing their commonality with it – challenging its
content but not its form. Either way, because it is such a fundamental point within the
geography of political thought and practice, community is not always afforded an
explicit theorisation by political philosophers or ideologists. There is often a focus on
the ways in which it should be dealt with by, for example, a theory of justice, but as
such community becomes an object to be taken account of by political theories rather
than a concept or practice on which those theories should dwell. Conservatives tend to
assert the nation and then fill out its meanings without opening it up to question (since
to make it questionable would be to admit its ideological nature). Similarly, utopian
forms of socialism assert the given unity of humankind but cannot go further in exploring what this means since to do so would be to make questionable the very basis on which their claims rest (hence the initial hostility of some socialist ideologists to forms of identity politics that will not assimilate themselves to a struggle waged on the terrain of economic identities but also the reverse hostility of those who feel they cannot assert their claims without a separate community to which they can be attached or from which they may be derived). In brushing up against the limits of the community, political discourse strikes against its own objectivity. It must operate within a horizon of community to be meaningful and so cannot make that horizon itself a matter of explicit political-theoretical engagement.

The consequences of this for the relationship between political theory and the question of identity are extreme. To consider it further we will, first, examine the influence of Aristotelian conceptions whose legacy (especially the capital importance placed on communication for community identity) has been almost total, and then turn to the problem of community in modern thought.

**Aristotle and the Politics of Community**

In the *Politics* Aristotle overcomes the clash between the laws of the family and the laws of society by making the state into a natural entity emerging from the development of social relations of necessity into those that take on the task of securing the good life. The state is a natural form of association for us. A natural communality forms the conceptual and practical horizon within which individuals, families and ultimately forms of the state are understood – a state whose purpose is to
create the virtuous individuals of the virtuous community just as it is a reflection of the immanent social relations that give rise to it.

This leads, amongst other things, to a concern with the correct size and number for such a community (see also Derrida, 1997). The *polis* must not be too large because, for example, foreigners may become difficult to detect and they may become citizens. It is ‘necessary that the citizens should know each other and know what kind of people they are’. There must be unity between the political structures, the shared culture of the citizens and the individual life. The community must not become detached from its basis in the organic and natural interaction of the people who share in its ways. Aristotle particularly fears that the political community might become separated from this base and its representation ungrounded. Hence, his concern with limitations of number and the avoidance of the sort of division and differentiation (be it political, ethical or derived from the social and economic structure) that might necessitate a projection or an imaginary of community. Unity is established through limitation and exclusion, by a discounting as well as a counting.

Aristotle’s conceptualisation entails a limited, bounded and strictly balanced communal order that forms the basis to political interaction and can foster virtue without that unity becoming a representation with a life of its own. His concern with establishing the ideal number of citizens is a concern with the scale of community such that it can be self-sufficient, not only economically but conceptually, able to conceive of itself without having to draw on anything outside of itself – except negatively in that it excludes or expels that which might disrupt it. Community must be the real and functioning horizon of political life with nothing beyond it. It cannot even be beyond itself. The fact of community identity that makes politics possible (a shared cultural and moral framework) also depends on the identity of community to
itself and the removal of anything that might disrupt that self-identity even to the extent that a man who is greater than all the rest should be removed from the city.

Of crucial importance here is communication since this is understood to make political life both possible and necessary. At the opening of *The Politics* Aristotle writes:

‘Nature, as we say, does nothing without some purpose; and she has endowed man alone among the animals with the power of speech. Speech is something different from voice, which is possessed by other animals also and used by them to express pain or pleasure; for their nature does indeed enable them not only to feel pleasure and pain but to communicate these feelings to each other. Speech, on the other hand, serves to indicate what is useful and what is harmful and so also what is just and what is unjust. For the real difference between man and other animals is that humans alone have perception of good an evil, the just and the unjust etc. It is the sharing of a common view in these matters that makes a household and a state’.

It is speech that facilitates the establishment of a commonality of viewpoint, the sharing of an identity. This shapes the strictures on size. Notably, it is too large if a herald can’t make himself heard (1326b6) or if the citizens can’t know each other (1326b14-15). The community must, literally, be able to talk to itself about itself. It is only through clarity of communication that the polity can maintain a unity of shared purpose and understanding and not fall into crisis with itself.

This Aristotelian framework (which makes community into the immanent plane on which morality is to be founded and is dependent on clarity of communication) has continued to be enormously influential. The most recent
exponents of Aristotelian inflected political thought still make plain the necessity of conceiving of politics within the framework of a communality that grounds morality and necessitates (as much as it is made possible by) a perfected and transparent communication. However, the conditions of modernity do not make it possible so straightforwardly to argue for the given-ness of communality, let alone the transparency of speech. These are problems that leave their mark on the way political thought has developed in modernity and bear directly on contemporary manifestations of identity politics.

**The Communal Horizon of Modernity**

(i) *Community, Ideology and the State*

If political enlightenment, or modernity, is understood as a rejection of groundings built on absolute claims such as divine right, natural inheritance or the traditions of the community and, therefore, as the capacity to ‘think for oneself’, to free oneself from these habits of thought, then it must also entail the rejection of forms of political thought based on the positing of a pre-political traditional community. Instead modern, liberal, political thought prefers myths such as that of the social contract by which the act of foundation is understood not as the achievement of some mysterious founder figure (a Lycurgus, Solon, Romulus or Rousseau’s lawgiver) nor as the natural expression of a spontaneous and organic sociality but as the (more or less) rational act of self-conscious individuals who choose to form a political community.

This changes the causal location of the political. Where classical or Christian political theory could regard community as mythically, naturally or divinely founded
(such that the task of philosophy and activism was to ensure that politics conformed to its requirements) in modern thought the political, or at least politics – practices of governance, strategies of organisation and negotiation - seems to come ‘before’ community, having as it does the function of ensuring that the community is enabled to be present to itself and is defended from disruptive elements. Even allegedly non-liberal forms of politics such as nationalism entail political leaders and activists working towards the establishment of the natural national community in whose name they then claim to be acting – they are bringing about what is already present – but they are also explicit about the extent to which it has to be (re)invented in order to permit the expression of a hitherto submerged national identity. The work of the nationalist political intellectual is to recover and reproduce those aspects of the national heritage (lost language, literature, history, the restoration of lost icons etc.) in order to re-awaken the nation. Politics becomes a matter of engendering the self-consciousness of community identity (be it an ethnic or a civic one). It thus assumes priority over community.

This is a significant reversal. It means that community is no longer thought of as emerging from an embedded social context such that it is really immanent in the everyday activities of citizens. It becomes an ‘idea’. What Aristotle feared has come to pass and community takes the form of an abstraction capable of seizing upon sections of the body politic, making the most of present forces and circumstances and mobilising action in its name. It becomes, in a specific and strong sense, ideological. Indeed the question of collective identity (who can and who can’t be understood as ‘having’ it, which identities count and so forth) becomes ideological as such. The ‘truth’ of identity is therefore inseparable from the conditions under which it is
elaborated and the political, historical and communicative contexts of its enunciation (or interpellation).

In *The German Ideology* Marx, in a moment not so far removed from Aristotelian premises, argues that ‘language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language like consciousness only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men’ (Marx, 1988: 167). Furthermore, the division of labour ‘only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labour appears’, the first form of ideologists being the priests. Consciousness can now ‘flatter itself that it…really represents something without representing something real’ (ibid.: 168) but it will still find itself in contradiction with existing social relations (because of contradictions between these relations and the forces of production).

For Marx, the division of labour is a force of contradiction and decomposition dividing the interests of individuals from the communal interests of all, ‘and out of this very contradiction between the interest of the individual and that of the community the latter takes an independent form as the State, divorced from the real interests of individual and community, and at the same time as an illusory communal life’ (ibid.: 169). Struggles over control of the state are thus understood by Marx as struggles to represent the interests of a particular community (a social class) as the interests of all and to make the state embody that communality and this is related to the development of ‘practical consciousness’ in the form of language and communication. Marx thus argues that the limits of communication are also the limits of consciousness (see also Balibar, 1995).
Now, Marx’s argument here does reactivate some of the premises we are here concerned to query. Indeed, one may understand from these arguments of a young Marx that his conceptualisation of ideology, and even of alienation, are related to a perspective on the corruption of community in modern states, marked (in part) by the control of communication taken by ideologists. Such a line of thought reappears in later Marxisms (most obviously and recently the post-Marxist liberalism of Habermas). But there is an extra element within Marx’s approach in as much as the materialist conception of history, in avoiding metaphysical presuppositions, is led to insist on the basis of community in actual and ongoing communication and contact (in a very Aristotelian manner) and thus to treat abstractions of community as ideological impositions. But these are not understood simply as epistemological errors or flights of fancy. Consciousness here is not sidelined, it does represent something but what it represents is not real. So, although this approach to Marxism can indeed lead to a utopian desire to reconstruct affective social ties emerging from a shared identity which in turn derives from a shared (and thus limited) way of life, it also opens the way to understanding something important about ‘community’ in modern social and political life. For the implication is that community is a ‘real’ representation, if not a real thing, and one thoroughly mediated by the state.

The state emerges out of the contradictions caused by the division of labour but including the contradiction within and between consciousness, the division of mental and manual labour. It takes on the ‘intellectual’ role of manufacturing an abstract communality. One of the central functions of the modern state is to produce a communal identity⁸ and thus to heal the wound wrought by the division of labour and the institution of modern society. But in so doing community is precisely the sort of

⁸ Here we might refer to Foucault’s work on governmentality and his explication of the mechanisms of this subjectivation. However from this perspective we would want to emphasise not dividing practices but unifying ones (though of course the two are intrinsically related).
abstraction feared by Aristotle and ideological through and through. The terrain of politics is thus constituted as a terrain upon which battles over the identity of the community are waged and the strategic centre of that battle is the state since control of it can be thought of as control of the consciousness of community.

Since community is understood as dependent on the capacity of a people to be addressed as such, and to address themselves, many of the early battles in the formation of modern states were around the control of communication and the proliferation of its forms. As a later, avowedly non-humanist, Marxist argued in contrast to the revelatory discourse of the feudal state the modern capitalist state ‘serves as the frame of reference within which the various segments of reasoning and their supporting apparatuses find homogenous ground for their differential function…the Capitalist state installs a uniform national language and eliminates all other languages. This national language is necessary not only for the creation of a national economy and market, but still more for the exercise of the state’s political role. It is therefore the mission of the national State to organise the processes of thought by forging the materiality of the people-nation, and to create a language which, while doubtless situated within ideological formations, is by no means reducible to an ideological operation’ (Poulantzas, 1980: 58). The importance of writing and communication for the state follows from this, something which it spreads beyond the narrow realms of the state, into the schools for example, such that grammar and orthography become systematised and established as networks of power (ibid.: 60).

The state, while individualising, or individuating, simultaneously collectivises, most obviously, initially, in the form of the national citizen who is part of a national unity made possible by that state. It attempts to constitute an historical tradition,
locating the nation in what Anderson (1993) refers to as homogenous empty time. The pre-capitalist territories ‘have no historicity of their own, since political time is the time of the prince-body’ (Poulantzas, 1980.: 110) but the capitalist state institutes a ‘historicity of territory and territorialisation of history’ (ibid.: 114) in which tradition becomes understood as a series of moments ‘which produce an irreversible history punctuated by the State’ and ‘organises the forward course of the nation and thus tends to monopolise the national tradition by making it the moment of a becoming designated by itself, and by storing up the memory of the people nation’. It is organisations of the state (universities, museums, monuments, and schools etc.) that mark out this new history and disseminate it to the citizens interpellated simultaneously as individuals and as national citizens fortunate enough to be at the present end of this sequence of naturalised events.

What this means in terms of our understanding of community and identity politics, to re-state the discussion so far, is that, through the attempted monopolisation and standardisation of forms of communication, and the division of mental and manual labour the state takes on the role of producing a communal identity from which it then attains legitimacy. This is a function intimately related to the development of capitalism (for example the role of print-capitalism and the destabilising effects of the class based division of labour) but not reducible to it. Its net effect is to turn the question of communal identity into a central question of all political activity. This generates specific forms of politics. Movements may seek to challenge this form of communality by advocating its substitution (by a truer more original one or by a new promised one) or demanding its reform so as to include some aspect not previously counted. The capitalist state in trying to monopolise identity (to secure legitimacy and to produce the conditions necessary for the expansion of trade
and the free movement of labour) induces counter-hegemonic forms of politics that predicate themselves on alternative identities.

(ii) The Community of Liberal Individuals

In the nineteenth century, when some theorists of urban modernity had despaired at the decline in communality wrought by industrialisation and, like Tönnies, advocated the return to some kind of natural and organic form of communal association, Durkheim found this very force of dislocation to be the basis of social solidarity. For him, the function of the division of labour is ‘to create in two or more persons a feeling of solidarity...to cause coherence among friends and to stamp them with its seal’ (1933: 56). Hence: ‘it must have a moral character, for the need of order, harmony, and social solidarity is generally considered moral’ (1933: 63). The ‘collective consciousness’ of ‘traditional’ community is not destroyed but made abstract, becoming transcendental and universal. Community is not restricted to societies based on the mechanical solidarity of likeness. It is something that will develop in liberal societies organised by civil law and united by the ‘cult of individualism’. The division of labour represents the binding of complementary differences in ‘a true exchange of services’ and community shifts from the position of threatened ontology to immanent promise. Durkheim saw the conscience collective of traditional communities as a force for social regulation manifesting itself in a community's collective representations. While he considered the form of social solidarity found in industrial societies to be rational rather than mythic, he also recognised that ‘there can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas
which make its unity and personality’ (1987: 233). That is to say, it still requires moments when the community could believe itself to be talking to itself and thus grasping itself as its own object in discourse. And we can see in political modernity the increasing concern to manifest at the level of collective culture just this kind of unity by and through which a collective identity is created and expressed and to maintain a culture that can provide both unity and legitimacy.

On one level this does indeed replay the patterns we considered earlier in relation to Aristotle – a kind of political metaphysics of community. It is the presence (both actual and metaphysical) of community that makes a good society possible and politics must work to maintain this. But it is also the function of the state to ensure this ordering. Any perceived failing in the political sphere can be understood as a failure of the community to be fully present or of politics to be faithful to the identity of the community which it serves. Durkheim revises the understanding of community so as to give to it a solid and rational foundation in the present thereby legitimating the state and its action upon communal identity.

In most forms of modern liberalism a discourse of community still forms the horizon of that which is considered politically intelligible. Politics is identified as the process by which certain sorts of collective are maintained but now the task of maintaining that community becomes paramount because it is understood as threatened by the same processes that also make it possible for us to found true community for the first time. The state must take on the role of ‘educating’ a public and, through the monopolising of systems of schooling, communications and the standardisation of communicative forms, from language itself to the technical and scientific manuals of the new experts. It thus secures the new community of disparate

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9 This is especially clear in the field of communication where rights to representation are demanded along with legal measures to ensure (in some cases) guaranteed channel space for minority languages or even majority languages threatened by the spread of American-English.
individuals produced as capable of fulfilling a specialised function in the division of labour.

The act of founding the ‘we’ of politics thus becomes visible as the primary political act and as dependent on the regulation of communications (in the widest sense). But this presents modernity with a paradox – if society is to be ordered then a unifying identity must be forged. But who or what is to forge that identity, who is to be the founder if they cannot have an identity in the first place – who is to be the agent of change? In Durkheim the possibility is immanent within social structures but needs to be brought to fruition with the underpinnings of a liberal civil law. The state, then, must be an agent in the constitution of the community that it can then represent.

But this incorporation of the state into the production of community (not merely its reflection) generates a whole host of political problems, both theoretical and practical. In Athens the state could be believed to embody the identity of the people, to be the people and a manifestation of their will (a dream to which Republicanism still clings). For liberal modernity the state is an institution that works in the interests of the community but is not co-terminus with it. This generates conceptions of the neutral state and a denial of any right of a community to occupy it in full. Rather the state will, as it were, seek to host various communal aspirations provided they do not rival the greater communality that is bound up with the question of legitimacy since the state is legitimate in as much as it represents the community of communities (Rawls calls it a social union of social unions) and the interests of the people in them.

Historically nationalism, (liberal or otherwise) was the solution to this problem. With nationalism the state and the community can be presumed to have some intrinsic inter-relationship and thus be seen as more legitimate than imperial
and/or multinational states. At extremes this can mutate into fascism where the community becomes the same as the state which can, therefore, be believed incapable of acting against the community. For liberalism, community cannot explicitly be thought in terms of nationalist nostalgia, it seeks to free individuals from the strictures of the communal, nor will it allow the state to become equated with the community since this would limit the aspirations and liberty of the individual. Instead it seeks to find a way by which we can submit to the dictates of a higher, universal-communal, reason and founds communality and solidarity through the establishment of a commitment to a shared legal framework for the adjudication of disputes, underpinned by an immanent morality. The decentred state which administers that law is the expression of the community of decentred rationally willing liberal individuals (who desire to conform to that immanent morality since without so doing they fear they will collapse into chaos). When everyone endorses the tenets of liberal political theory and accepts the authority of the constitutional state, or at least its commitment to a shared law, the universal and particular will finally cohabit.

This intensifies the liberal division of social space into a political realm of government and state and a non-political civil realm. In the latter the ontological question of community identity may be raised and sectional interests formed. These are not to be interfered with by the state. Rather than a member of an enclosed community of fate the archetypal liberal individual is able to enter freely into social relationships that have been chosen or consented to rather than imposed through tradition. The only identity that matters is the self-identity of the individual which needs to be free to choose only those ‘comprehensive doctrines’, in Rawls phrase, it
wishes to. This is essential if it is to be enabled to be true to itself. They are a matter of personal choice not a political concern. But should these identities come into conflict then the state has a role to play and then politics needs a stage onto which it can be put – something on which the just interaction of these rivals can stand. This is what the state must also stand on – the proper forms of communication.

For Kant the enlightened liberal public exercises its reason as part of a community of literate citizens. Aristotle’s community that can communicate with itself turns into a community of communicators. Communication, and the community it engenders, become central elements in the judgement of right reason – the tribunal that evaluates it. Kant links duty, theory and morality with the very existence of humans as that species destined to fulfil the promise, and realise the capacity, of the reason given to them by their communicative nature. The Kantian subject is oriented towards cosmopolitan hospitality because of his capacity to reason, to be edified by rational publicity. And this level of publicity necessitates both communication and others to communicate with. The human subject can only realise the essence of their humanity as part of a universalised citizenship. And to be a citizen – to be a free and reasoning subject – every institution, every nation, must embody that cosmopolitan rationality. Humanity itself is the community with both essence and telos that makes this necessary. Community, the world and history become one with thinking itself for only the species, not the individual, can progress in this way (see also Balibar, 1994). The non-substantive universal framework that preserves specificity yet can justly claim to accommodate and represent the interests of all thus turns out to have been the destiny of literate European identity all along.

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This also means they cannot be all that comprehensive. If they are too comprehensive then they will conflict with the principles of liberal autonomy and rationality. Rousseau’s legacy to Kant shows itself here since the implicit conclusion is that the individual is not free to render him or herself unfree where unfreedom consists of committing to a world-view that is not subordinate to the demands of the liberal categorical imperative – Kant’s spectral (and theological) version of the general will.
Liberal society is that within which the community is defined by its capacity and need for free, open and transparent speech and discussion. But this transparency is made possible by the positing of a pre-existing universal community of speech. Speech which does not conform to the rules and limits of that community is, therefore, not speech at all, or at least not ‘rational discourse’, little more, perhaps, than the old braying of the barbarians. Throughout its history Liberal theory has increasingly turned to the theorisation of communication and dialogue in an attempt to re-found community.

In the left-liberal/social democratic version, as advanced by Habermas, power relations and concomitant modes of identification/subjectivation (the relations that constitute public spheres and communal blocs in heterogeneous ways) are displaced along communicative networks of inter-subjectivity held in place by procedural frameworks for deliberation made manifest via the law. Habermas regards this as a ‘subjectless form’ of communication. That is to say, the community that does the communicating is not conceived of as a community because community has dissolved into the act of communication itself. It is through the constitution that this derives a kind of empirical facticity that holds down and allows to function around it a speech community that can constitute a tribunal of public reason. Habermas is quite aware of the dangers of an immanentist conception of community (indeed especially aware and keen to avoid it) but he still aims to establish what might be just or right or fair by reference to a communality unified by its capacity to talk coherently with itself and then attached to a state form that can service and represent it. But by emphasising the act of foundation, communication, he aims to establish a polity defined only by a doctrinal attachment to the coincidence of its own potential transparency with the promise of universal reason and this in turn derives from the communal identity of the
whole of speaking humanity. This leads to a fetishisation of certain forms of communication that are understood to produce the magical realm within which community secretly resides as permanently implicit or promised (there is also the balancing repulsion at other forms of speech that are not understood as trying to fulfil this promise).

It would be wrong to employ here a standard ‘post-modern’ critique of Habermas (or indeed of a liberal theorist such as Rawls) and simply argue that they mistake a particular for a universal. These theories do recognise particularity. But they try to re-found universality and objectivity somewhere else - beyond or underneath rather than on top of particularity. They are forms of identity politics but identity is understood as something that has to be achieved (explicitly in the Habermasian invocation of the unfinished project of Enlightenment) through the clear communication of all parties engaging in processes of justification where persons identify with the process – hence the fetishisation of law and of its rules of communication in both Habermasian but more especially North American versions of liberalism in a Kantian style.

(iii) State, Community, Politics

Modern liberal democratic and capitalist societies turn to the state as the solution to the problem of how to deal with the emergence of politics before there is a community to be political. At the present time that means bringing about that community of shared purpose but not representing a single identity. This ‘neutrality’ is the ideology of contemporary liberalism which exercises an exclusionary power on the basis of its inclusiveness. This takes the form of discounting from politics those
forms of communication that do not support the rules of politico-legal discourse.\textsuperscript{11} All may influence the state but they must speak to it in the correct manner. The political state becomes a specifically legal state and lawyers the leading intellectual class charged with the responsibility of winning justice and exercising human rights for all. Enlightenment becomes a concern with ‘speaking properly’ and only those prepared to adopt the correct forms of ‘neutral’ communication can participate in proper politics – all else is counter-enlightenment nonsense. ‘Recognition’ thus comes to mean the kind of recognition a member of a panel seeks from a chair of a meeting that their form of speech be noted and counted. It does not necessarily mean recognition for what or who you claim to be but recognition that what you speak about and the way in which you speak about it can justly be placed on the public agenda.

For Aristotle the rhetorical mode proper to politics is the deliberative and its time orientation is the future. Its aim is to secure advantage or to inflict harm on an opponent. The mode proper to legal discourse is that of the forensic. Here the time orientation is the past and the objective is to secure justice or perpetrate injustice. Under liberalism public rhetoric becomes a kind of forensics of the future aimed at securing advantage in the name of justice. For this mode all moves must be accounted for in advance and the rules of the game can only be rewritten from within the rules of the game while the right of entry depends on a forensic exhumation of the past in order to prove the validity of the communal identity claim in the present.

As the means of communication have expanded, along with the possibilities for travel and movement within and between actually-existing communities, the capacity for groups to communicate within themselves has simultaneously expanded

\textsuperscript{11} This is a procedure well embedded in democratic institutions such as Parliaments and legal courts where only those authorised and who authorise themselves by using the right forms of speech can speak. Those who do not speak properly are found in contempt and made to leave the building.
and fractured. The self-discursive community need not be geographically contiguous. The neutral legal state is then an invitation to a proliferation of forms of identity politics enabled to register appeals to it. It calls up identity politics but cannot resolve the disputes it engenders because everybody has to win (which really means that the constitution of the legal state must not itself be questioned). Functioning cultural ‘communities of fate’ within the heart of the community of ‘willing liberals’ conflict with the horizon of the liberal community and, in so doing, render that horizon visible, exposing its contingency.

This is the shape of contemporary Western politics. Identity claims seek recognition varying in their radicalism with some seeking proper inclusion into the community of communities others beginning sometimes to question the definition of the proper speech community and demanding a reassessment of what it means to be one of the people that count. Political movements based around such identity claims thus pertain to one of two forms of universalism. The first of these is the separatist attempt to constitute a new or other universality opposing that of the state as it is. The second is more integrationist and functions by holding itself up as a living contradiction to the presumed universality of the community embedded in the state, thus forcing it to alter the character of the communal ideality it represents (such would be the strategy behind the liberal elements of the early suffragist movement for example). The present situation represents not a novel departure in the history of identity politics but a continuation and, to some extent, proliferation. But many of these so-called identity movements seek an accommodation from the state, a recognition. Others (again of both left and right) contain elements that suggest they

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12 The fracturing of effective monopolies over communication (which is also the making manifest of the intrinsically fractured nature of communication) breaks also the monopoly of legitimacy centred on the state. The communication based legitimacy of social sub-systems becomes possible. This is, in a sense, what identity politics really is. Social wide legitimacy becomes seen as impossible and is replaced by the site specific legitimacy of ‘authenticity’.
wish to re-write the communal identity of the nation or state and thus pose a more radical challenge. But these movements repeat the strategies of political thought and ideology that we have been considering. They posit the presence of a community from which certain claims can be derived and must thus always also be involved in an interpellation/subjectivation as well as an emancipation. This means their position with regard to the dominant hegemony is variable and conjunctural. Sometimes they may be in a position to launch a more deep level critique of the liberal, neutral, state (be it from the position of reactionary conservatism or of extended emancipation) but on other occasions they will primarily seek an accommodation with that state. What neither party has much of an investment in is a questioning of the very claim to community and identity. In this sense many forms of identity politics represent brief moments of political fire prior to their fulfilment of their desire in the extinguishing of that flame.

**Conclusion**

The argument has been that all politics is a kind of identity politics. Modern liberalism seeks to avoid conflicts of identity by appealing to us to refrain from asserting the universalisability of our particular identity and instead to identify with the procedures and forms of speech that are themselves implicit in the communal identity of humanity and whose means of expression can be justly supervised within the frameworks of a legal state. In so doing the politicality of this claim to the ‘we-ness’ of liberals is suppressed but ‘we-ness’ then becomes a core issue of politics and ideology turning on who can be recognised as having spoken properly. This gives rise to the politicisation of those forms of perceived identity that do not understand
themselves to be included in this we. It is in this sense that the identity politics believed to threaten liberalism is a threat of its own making.

Contemporary ‘identity politics’, of the more narrowly defined form, follows the same pattern in advancing claims (to rights, recognition etc.) derived from the positing of a community that justifies their presence. One thinks not only of forms of ethno-nationalism or regionalism but also of liberation movements that build themselves around the communality (be it founded from common experience, common oppression or natural facts) of all women, people of a certain ethnicity and so forth and are organised in response to their rejection of their incomplete incorporation into the universal community promised by capitalist liberalism. It is from the positing of this communality that the politics of identity is derived but such movements are also forced to make politics the means by which the identity in question will come to be recognised as constituting a form of community. As such they too must ‘interpellate’ people into their community and often become caught on the difficulty of having to consequently prescribe what the people of the community in question are like (doing exactly what they initially claimed to be the problem with the not-so-neutral state.

Such identity movements have been facilitated by developments in communication that now make it possible, indeed relatively easy, for groups to keep in permanent contact, able to continuously circulate the images and languages out of which a community can be experienced as actually existing. But often what they want is the incorporation of their particular community into the community of communicators that alone has access to the power of the state.

This paper, though touching on many issues (most of which cannot here be properly explored) has had modest aims. It has tried to situate the movements of
contemporary identity politics within a broader tradition of political thinking about
the communal and communication and to relate this to the ways in which theorists and
practitioners of politics have conceived of these things. It has also touched on some of
the historical and technological contexts of which this tradition has been a part.

To some extent the implicit argument of all this is that the tradition itself
causes certain misconceptions and creates problems. But there is no way this tradition
can be escaped – it is part of the world in which we live. But we can understand it and
use an appreciation of that tradition when engaging in political analyses, judgements
or acts. We can also seek to extend and expand that tradition rather than leave it to
contract and become ever more constraining. Certainly we cannot reject the concept
of community or drift into a hyper-individualism (of the sort advocated by some so-
called postmodernist reactionaries, extreme libertarians or those in marketing). The
forming of a ‘we’, and the adventure of alliance and compromise it necessitates, are
what politics is. But neither can we allow the proliferation of institutions designed to
limit or bracket off elements of this collective conversation.

From the critical point of view we can concentrate on the aporia, the absences
and exclusions around which the ceaseless construction of ‘we’ takes place. We
might, for example, examine the processes of identity differentiation through the
negation of an ‘other’. Many have fruitfully pursued this strategy. But we can also
examine what is, more generally, missing from all this communality. The centrality of
community and communication in shaping the politics of identity that characterises
capitalist democracies obscures and makes difficult alternative conceptualisations of
solidarity and of communication and excludes in its very desire to include. Here three
things demand to be asked after.
Firstly this form of state (the legal, neutral, liberal state) aims to instantiate a kind of bounded democratic agonism. It is agonistic in that the endless development and recombination of forms of identity is accounted for and in making their case identities do have the chance to have themselves recognised. But it is bounded in that the forms of speech (and thus the kinds of community) that count are limited in order to sustain the belief in universality. One effect of this is, as noted, the prioritising of forms of legal argument and of certain spaces as legitimate places for the staging of political claims: the law courts, the legislatures etc. But what of the informal public spheres and the politicality that manifestly occurs in civil society? It is here in the cultural and economic spheres that forms of communal life are constituted and disrupted but the struggles waged here have only an indirect relation to the formal political sphere which they can influence only through those representatives empowered to speak for them. At the same time, of course, the state is actively engaging in moulding these spheres to suit the liberal legal state. The state is a constitutive presence within the formation of ‘we’ and never, not for a moment, is it really a neutral terrain. By its very definition that state has a kind of Hobbesian right over the life or death of a community seeking recognition and it is only the presence of that state that makes these new communal demands possible. Thus the interaction of the state with the economic and cultural spheres (a thoroughly artificial conceptualisation in any case) thus has to be at the heart of an analysis of the dynamics of identity politics.13

13 This statement could appear to be a fairly direct refutation of the Foucauldian demand to ‘cut off the king’s head’ in political theory and not centre analysis on the state. However, the position implied here does not, by any means, rule out Foucauldian approaches since these, in their focus on the micro-strategies of power, precisely complement the sort of analysis called for here. While the manifest place of the state in the framing of everyday as well as ‘political’ life cannot be downplayed it has to be understood not in terms of the state as the centre of all power but rather of the state and allied institutions as points through which power relations move. Without doubt the construction, exhortation and management of ‘community’ is a key way through which ‘governing of the soul’ takes place as is the regulation of communications.
This brings us to the second absence. For while the place of the state is crucial, it cannot be denied that there are forms of engagement and communication that exceed and evade the legally constituted realms of the state. What, then, is the relationship between these much wider ranging acts of communication and the political formation, and expression, of communalities? Or, more bluntly, by what mechanisms may such expressions be transformed into political causes that do aim themselves at the state. This entails a much broader conception of and focus upon these multifarious ‘public spheres’ and the ways in which communication in and between them is conducted. The forms of communication that can both constitute and represent a communality are limited. As the Greeks well knew, artistic, dramatic and poetic works are also forms of communication but they are forms that do not always seek to conform to prescribed rules (despite the efforts of centuries of literary criticism) but to extend and expand the range of things communicated and the ways in which communication takes place. They can be forms of invitation to a moment of communality, to be an audience and to share in an experience, a form of being together that is analogous to the impact of a successful political speech or the community of acolytes that may form around the interpretation of the texts of a particular philosopher. These forms of communication are disavowed by the arena of ‘official’, state, politics. Can a political system or structure be prepared to allow entry by these other forms of communication? For Habermas the possibility of reason is presupposed in every discourse – but then so is poetry which is neither reasonable or unreasonable (at least not as poetry). For Habermas, the wider formation of public opinion is important but ‘public influence is transformed into communicative power only after it passes through the filters of the institutionalised procedures of democratic opinion-and-will-formation and enters through parliamentary debates into legitimate
lawmaking’ (Habermas, 1997: 371). This leaves out of account the manifest power of various communicative forms within the non-political public sphere. It is one thing to argue that they should not directly influence political decision making independent of processes of justification and verification but it is also manifestly the case (as Habermas well knows) that forms of culture and expression (which often emanate from highly politicised sources such as powerful trans-national corporations or state-sponsored broadcasting systems) do help define, shape and limit public opinion. For this reason they too need to be taken account of by a process of political deliberation but since this takes the form of deliberation about the conditions by which deliberation can and should be possible the Habermasian model threatens to disappear under the pressure of infinite regress. But it should put firmly on the centre of any political agenda the structure and organisation of the systems of communication through which identities come to be experienced or are created and manifested since these are fundamental in the constitution of identity politics and indeed politics in general.14

14 This is a little unfair to Habermas who shows awareness of the dynamism in the unregulated public sphere. While the legislative sphere deals with problems rather than discovering or identifying them ‘these bodies rely not only on the administrations preparatory work and further processing but also on the context of discovery provided by a procedurally unregulated public sphere that is borne by the general public of citizens’. This is a ‘weak’ public and the vehicle of public opinion. There is an ‘open and inclusive network of overlapping, subcultural publics having fluid temporal social and substantive boundaries…The currents of public communication are channelled by mass media and flow through different publics that develop informally inside associations. Taken together they form a “wild” complex that resists organisation as a whole’ (Habermas, 1997: 307).

Habermas also notes that problems experienced in the private sphere may ‘find their concise expression in the languages of religion, art, and literature, the literary public sphere in the broader sense, which is specialised for the articulation of values and world disclosure, is intertwined with the political public sphere’ (ibid.: 365). However, he limits the influence such activities may have. He does this partly because he intends them to be constrained by the necessity of their going through institutionalised structures that ensure they are tied to the normative implications (as he sees them) of communicative power. Thus his emphasis is on how these may come to have an influence on the public agenda. He also downplays the nature of the power relations going on within this ‘wild complex’ and the circular relationship it has to the state which, in any case, is what makes this pattern possible. To put things in terms used earlier in this paper he assimilates these ‘world-disclosing’ activities to the moment of politics as administration and adjudication leaving the more ontological moment to one side – it emerges at moments of ‘crisis’ but here too is ultimately to be assimilated. In essence these moments are, for Habermas, evidence of failure. The difference between Habermasian discourse ethics and those forms of radical democracy derived from thinkers such as Laclau and various post-
For political theory this requires thinking about regimes, in the widest sense of that term, including culture and communication and the organisation of labour. It is into these spheres that democracy must also penetrate so that we recognise the importance (the fundamental, even foundational, importance) of political action oriented towards the restructuring of these spheres in ways that make them sites for the contestation and assertion of identities that (in such a plurality of public spaces) become visible as intrinsically plural. We need to reverse the centre-periphery relations (of state and society) developed by Habermas and implied by Rawlsians such that the field of public culture becomes more central and its relations and flows of power anything but marginal. Without such a move we can only remain caught within the dilemmas of particularism and universalism, relativism and exclusionary objectivities because we will be constructing models without consideration of this core dynamism where these concepts come under permanent and performative critique.

Politics is about both demonstration and expression. It is an aesthetic expression and it is through this (perhaps first of all) that communities and identities begin to be heard and seen as such. One of the motive forces behind more recent forms of identity politics (and its academic valorisation) has been the proliferation of aesthetic forms and their widespread availability. It has been in media and cultural studies that these have been most heavily analysed because they are so apparent in the complex movements of literature, poetry, popular culture and so forth. In this respect structuralists is in the emphasis they place on these two moments of politics and the value they place on crisis. From the point of view of identity politics the problem is that discussed above – to have an influence they must cease to be ‘outside’ of the system although this is often exactly what gives them their meaning and identity (as, for example, with the rather inchoate oppositional movements lumped under the banner of ‘anti-capitalism). From the wider normative standpoint the problem is that this can have no bearing on those who simply cannot speak., an issue raised briefly below.
the challenge of identity politics is also a challenge to think about the cultural realm and its place in relation to politics without subordinating one to the other. The state founded on the power of cultural expression is likely to be intolerant but the state that ignores these forms will also be so. The ‘privileging’ of the sphere of the cultural in radical cultural studies (much decried by those Marxists used to thinking mostly about the relationship between wages, prices and profits) needs to be understood as an attempt to re-orient the relationship between the spheres or levels of a social formation, to recognise that consciousness does indeed flatter itself that it is something really real and language and communication (‘practical consciousness’) are as fundamental to the functioning of politics and economics as they are to it.

The third absence from the tradition we have been exploring is that of the community that is not a community, of those who cannot communicate. This is the community that Jacques Rancière refers to as the ‘part that has no part’. There are those who have no part and cannot form a community precisely because their condition is that of those who cannot speak as a community nor be entered for consideration as one - those whose condition is ‘outside’. When we enter the chambers of the legal state to argue for recognition of our type we enter as people already capable of consideration – people seeking an acknowledgement of the stake we already know we have. By the time things have moved along that far the big victories have already been won. For Rancière this is not the moment of politics. For him ‘the very nature of politics is such that the stage has not been built, that the object has not been recognised, and that the very partners in the debate have not been legitimised, as such. Politics begins when it becomes apparent that the debate is about something that has not been noticed, when the person who says so is a speaker who has not been recognised as such and when, ultimately, that person’s very status as a
Speaking being is in question’ (Rancière, 1997: 35). Politics is what happens when the ‘natural’ forms of domination are interrupted by those who have no part: ‘This institution is the whole of politics as a specific form of connection. It defines the common of the community as a political community, in other words as divided, as based on a wrong that escapes the arithmetic of exchange and reparation’ (Rancière, 1999: 11-12). What lies outside this arithmetic is the positing of persons as speaking beings as such, the only political question. This entails the entwining of ‘world-disclosing’ speech with argument, where ‘it is necessary to simultaneously produce both the argument and the situation in which it is to be understood, the object of the discussion and the world in which it features as object’ (ibid.: 57). This rests in turn on the question of equality – of the fact that we are speaking beings as such. For one theme runs through everything we have considered. That we think in such a way that persons must demand equality (be it of recognition, respect, esteem or of goods understood as related to these) and that they demand it in as much as they assert an identity that is worthy of it. To be equal is taken to mean something like equality of one identity with another. It is this that causes much liberal angst because it seems that identities contradict one another in their fundamental ethical positions, because acknowledging the equality of one with another means acknowledging the equality of these positions. But why is this connection between identity and equality assumed at all? The ‘error’ of identity politics is that it is politics in a very old, very traditional style and it perpetuates fundamental problems and exclusions. Capitalist democratic states invite people to find an identity through which they can make their demands. As a result, in the most ‘advanced’ such democracy there sometimes seems to be nothing but the noise of rival identity claims slugging it out in the safely contained confines of the courtroom and classroom. But equality is not dependent on identity,
still less on the positing of some equivalence between identities. Equality just is and I must manifest it to others in spite of, not because of identity claims. It is not only when what an other says to me is something I understand that I owe them respect. Someone is speaking and I cannot see who it is nor understand what they are saying. So I must find them and try to hear. That is equality. Through actually practising it and experiencing the gulfs between us that it makes plain I may find community in the absence of identity. The price to pay for it is living in the ungrounded and insecure community of the political. But all else, however comforting, is a lie.

**Bibliography**


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