Debating identity

Identities are conceptually more complex than they may at first appear. From one point of view, they define who somebody is in terms of a trait, which might be anything from, for instance, a physical feature of the body, a belief, a genealogy or a cultural preference. In effect they identify by placing individuals into groups who share that trait. And this has a consequence: it means that identity is won at the price of reducing individuality. My identity as a man, for instance, both defines me and hampers me with 50 per cent (roughly) of the population, radically reducing my particularity. Furthermore the traits chosen to ascribe identity to an individual are always contingent, since whatever trait is chosen to fix identity, another one could have been chosen, even if it seems 'natural' to identify people by, for instance, their gender (and it seems as if all known societies do in fact identify people by gender). Identities, then, are not given in terms of what individuals are as a whole, but in terms of more or less arbitrarily selected features that they possess. For the most part, individuals have little power to choose what features will be used to identify them – these are determined socially, from the outside.

From the point of view of individuals, it may seem as if, because identities are external, partial and collectivising, they dislocate one from oneself. They anchor who you are to only a part of yourself. Yet, from the other side, of course, because individuals exist socially in and through their identities, without an identity there is no such thing as a socially situated individual. Societies, identities and individuals do not exist independently of one another, and at a theoretical level, it is meaningless to criticise identities in general for depriving individuals of individuality, just as it is wrong to contend that individuals comprise nothing but their identities. Identities are not so much the mediation between individuals and society as constitutive of that relation.
However this is still a little too simple. Individuals don’t have a single identity, they have **identities**, and they do so just because identities are based on partial traits (skin colour, socio-economic status, gender, nationality, region, profession, generation and so on). I am a man and a New Zealander and an ecologist and bourgeois and an academic and Aquarian, etc. But not all identities carry equal weight in particular circumstances or have the same social consequences. Gender, race or ethnicity, and class are the identities, most of all, by which we are placed socially. And the relative weight of identities changes across time and space. For instance, in many nations the country in which one was born used to matter a great deal in terms of identity. Now (generally speaking) it matters much less. On the other hand, once nationality carried little weight as an identity trait; now it marks the identity with which states are most centrally engaged. Or take being a ‘man’, which, in the West, has been transformed over the last thirty years or so into an implicit universal (everyone was regarded as male unless otherwise marked) to being merely one identity among others.

Then, too, the terms by which identities are ascribed do not usually describe traits and groups neutrally. They are culturally reflected, and in the last instance are determined by power relations within a community, especially how these social relations between those using the identity-descriptor and those to whom the descriptor applies. Thus, for instance, it matters a great deal whether an American black person is called a nigger, an African American, a black, a Negro, etc. Each of these terms marks an identity which is both the same as (in that it marks out the same group) and different from (in that it has different connotations) each of the other terms. And each of these terms may change its meaning depending on who is using it, and in what context. Some identity words are used affirmatively by the groups they describe (and thus they mark ‘self-identities’), others are not. Quite often, words used by others to define a group insultingly or prejudicially are appropriated by the group themselves and turned into a term marking self-identity, usually after passing through a brief phase where they are used ironically: hippie, punk, nigger itself, for instance.

The fit between an identity and an individual self is, therefore, structurally loose, and is often thought of as requiring processes of ‘identification’ in order to be scaled (Fuss 1995). Certainly individuals differ as to the degree of intensity with which they connect to particular identities. Indeed, significant numbers of people struggle to ‘disidentify’ from – detach themselves from – given identities, with transsexuals the most famous of such groups. (In this case we have an identity based on dis-identification since, according to the cultural logic of gender-identities, an individual born a man can never wholly become a woman.) And where identities have a low cultural value, individuals ascribed such identities can internalize negative images of themselves. In such cases, the process of identification can cause psychic damage.

Identification remains something of a theoretical enigma: we saw earlier how, for post-Marxists, identification with any subject position can never be complete, since, from their perspective, the subject as subject is constituted by lack. But leaving aside this theoretical analysis, in many situations, identification can be accounted for more simply. People identify with their identities to a greater or lesser degree because identities constitute the framework of their lives, and also, on occasion, because pleasures and rewards follow from so doing. It is important to distinguish between given or inherited identities, many of which are based on corporeality (a Maori, a woman), and chosen identities, many of which are based on cultural, material or ideological choices or preferences (a conservative, a writer, an opera fan). This distinction (while by no means watertight: what about ideological homogenization in situations which seem often to be indeterminately inherited and chosen?) is useful insofar as it reminds us that there are many kinds and intensities of identification which no theory of identification is able to cover. And as Franz Fanon has pointed out, negative identities can be internalized as powerfully positive ones (Fanon 1966).

Furthermore, because identities are partial, they leave spaces outside of themselves. Not at all of me is covered by my being a ‘man’—or by any other of my identities, or by all of them together. There is something in me, a self or ‘interiority’, that has no identity: it belongs to me as an individual with a proper name but slips away from any interpersonal recognition at all. This is the world of private moods, desires and thoughts, which, which may not even be consciously articulated at all, where I may seem to most myself. Sometimes this space is associated with freedom or resistance, but there is no particular reason why that should be so. At best, if social identities are conceived of as limiting rather than enabling (and it makes more sense to regard them as simultaneously limiting and enabling), then the self outside identity escapes the limits of identity. But at a cost—precisely because what lacks identity cannot form a social persona.

There has been an increasing interest in identity since the seventies as a result of what has come to be called ‘identity politics’, a politics with which cultural studies has been aligned, as we know. Identity politics means, of course, a politics engaged on behalf of those with particular identities (usually historically marginalized ones) rather than a politics organised on the basis of particular social policies or philosophies. In fact these distinctions are somewhat nebulous since even traditional left/right politics was loosely organized around nominations and the origins of identity politics are murky: it is often said that they began with the civil rights movement in the USA during the early sixties, after which groups with specific cultural and social identities increasingly made political claims on the basis of those identities—in particular, African Americans on behalf of their racially defined community and feminists on behalf of women (Omi and Winant 1986, 75). These claims were connected to an analysis at once political and historical. In terms of history, it became apparent that for centuries in the West the values and attributes of a particular group—white, heterosexual men, and especially white, heterosexual, bourgeois men—had been taken as the norm. They exemplified what it was to be a human
being as such - universal humanness. The Enlightenment, as the historical moment that deprived religion and tradition of their social and political authority, had profoundly (so it was argued) consolidated the normativity of the white male by default - with God and history out of the picture, he stood at the world's centre as the privileged bearer of reason. Certainly - and this is the more important political point - the white heterosexual man was the locus of authority and power, with an access to the public sphere and to political and economic goods granted to no other group. Armed with this strong interpretation of history and politics, identity groups, including feminists, gays and lesbians, and various ethnic groups, have increasingly since the sixties been able to find spaces within the public sphere and even the formal political apparatus to assert and struggle for wants and needs that they have by virtue of their marginalised identity or to resist constraints imposed upon them by virtue of their identity. It is also sometimes said that identity politics are fuelled by the desire for 'recognition' (Taylor 1994) (the street word for which is 'respect'), but in most cases they have also been motivated by more than that - by the desire for access, liberty and fair, unprejudiced treatment. Nonetheless to the degree that identity politics does involve the claim that a certain cultural invisibility of the identity-group be rectified, it will contain a component of recognition that is lacking in other forms of politics, and it is important not to undervalue respect's value. Furthermore, where particular identities have been marginalised or demonised by the most powerful groups in a society, identity politics can involve 'consciousness raising', that is the critique of negative stereotypes and undoing the psychic damage involved in identifying with them.

It is worth pausing a moment to consider in more detail why identity politics became so familiar a part of the social and political landscape in the last decades of the twentieth century. In general there are two kinds of explanations for the emergence of political formations of this kind: one stresses the agency of the community and individualised interests involved; the other analyses the larger social conditions that made the new politics and its forms of association possible. Thus, to take a famous instance from history, was the British abolitionist movement empowered by slaves and their supporters or is it to be understood as a consequence of the relative economic inefficiency of slavery (see James 1963; Blackburn 1988)? In terms of modern identity politics: did African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, and the disabled form political associations on the basis of their autonomous will for liberation, or did they organise themselves politically because they were enabled to do so by circumstances? In fact we don't have to make a hard decision between these alternatives. The will and energy of marginalised groups has been crucial to identity politics but, nonetheless, such politics occurred when it did because of larger forces and openings, with the balance between 'push' and 'pull' factors differing in different circumstances.

The emergence of Occidental identity politics in the seventies can be regarded as a moment in a long history during which the authority of various national and colonial hegemonic 'ruling blocs' (in Anglophone countries WASPs [White Anglo-Saxon Protestants]) was gradually diminished. We are already quite familiar with this history, which shares many aspects with the history of postmodernism and globalisation: World War II was a key moment in the decline of elite hegemony for various reasons. The early Japanese victories in Asia showed that the West was not all invincible. The US military's dependency on African American troops and the subsequent GI Bill (which helped racial equality in the North but not in the South) helped re-energise the civil rights movement. And the revelation of the Holocaust significantly diminished the appeal of racist politics, basically cutting it off beyond the pale of respectability at least in its most overt forms. The decolonisation of the fifties also denoted European hegemony, and the South Asian sub-continent's long struggle for independence was especially important to that, as was, later, the victory of Vietnamese communists over, first, the French and then the USA. More concretely, the women's movement was enabled by a series of economic and technological developments: relative affluence, new devices for washing, cleaning, cooking, the oral contraceptive and so on, all of which gradually shifted the balance of power between the genders in everyday life - or at least did so in advanced industrial nations. Similarly supranationalism played a key role in the emergence of the gay liberation movement since it allowed strong gay communities to flourish in certain inner-city neighbourhoods. And as we have seen, the culture and media industries themselves accelerate segmentation and identity formation by quickly targeting particular identities as specific, de-limited consumer markets.

Cultural studies has often been regarded (and especially in the USA) as the academatisation of identity politics (and therefore an inheritor of this history), but in fact it has been split between two sides: one that has allied itself with marginal or subordinated identities; another that has understood identities as forms of constraint and rigidity or even as part of the social structuration of hegemony. Hence there have been repeated attempts to articulate a 'post-identity' cultural politics by turning to concepts such as hybridity, attempts that became more and more influential through the eighties and nineties, fuelled by an increasingly concrete sense of identity politics' conceptual and political difficulties.

We can summarise these difficulties as follows:

1 Identity politics tends to erase internal differences. Thus feminism failed to mark the difference between women of different classes or of different ethnicities, or indeed different attitudes towards femininity itself, a failure that almost crippled the movement.

2 A very similar point: identity politics often assumes that an identity is an essence - that there exists an essential (or authentic) way of being a woman, a Maori, an Asian, etc. Hybridity theory helps disabuse us of this notion, as we shall see below.
3 Identity politics tends to work by the principle of exclusion. Identities tend to be structured by reducing or demonising particular others, either in cases where socially dominant identities are being formed (the concept of the 'white' largely based on vilifying groups with other skin colours) or in cases where identity-groups are engaged in politics of emancipation (feminism was under pressure to represent all men as equals).

4 Identity politics tends to overlook identities around which lives are actually lived. In everyday life, one of the more important identities that individuals have is determined by the paid work that they do. (This has been of more interest to sociology than to cultural studies, in part because cultural studies has often been driven by the will to politicise identities and has been relatively uninterested in questions concerning paid work.)

5 When a political or social movement is grounded on identity, the content of the 'identity' tends to be emphasised and the importance of organisation and process in achieving political ends is neglected. This is because identity politics are often simultaneously concerned to increase the intensity of group solidarity and to fulfil claims to rights. Furthermore, because identities in identity politics are neither negotiable nor (within limits) able to be expanded to include those who don't share the identity, identity politics can lapse into rigidity and cause fragmentation of the shared ground that politics in certain conjunctures needs to operate within. This tendency is most marked when an identity is ascribed in terms of a culture, as we will see in the section on multiculturalism.

6 Identity politics tends to invent legitimating histories or traditions which can be politically (then commercially) exploited. Perhaps national identities are the most obvious instance of this, since 'invented traditions' have been especially strong in their case. The most famous example is the 'invention' of the Scottish tartan and kilt as an important signifier of national identity, first by English-cladding manufacturers during the eighteenth century and then by Sir Walter Scott's work on behalf of cultural nationalism during the early nineteenth century (see Hollowswain and Ranger 1983).

Perhaps cultural studies' strongest attempt to address these problems was to try and rethink identity in such a way that the concept lost its rigidity. This attempt took various forms, the most widely disseminated of which is the category of 'hybridity', but another is what Stuart Hall called 'unities in difference' (Hall 1987, 45). In both cases, identity is conceived not as a fixed marker but in terms of the processes or performances by which identities are formed. According to this theory, these processes are continual: the meaning and force of all identities are in constant mutation (although they sometimes change more slowly than at other times). Identities are not just given or chosen, they have to be enacted, but this means that they have to enter into negotiation with the situation in which they are performed or otherwise acted upon. More than that: in a post-Marxist turn, it is supposed that individuals and groups can assert their identity all the more intensely because identity as such is always a little out of reach — no identity orders a whole subjectivity or forms a secure ground for all life-practices. To put this in other terms: hybridity theory thinks of identity not as a marker, a stable trait shared across groups, but as a practice whose meaning and effect is constantly mutating as its context changes.

But why 'hybridity'? For various reasons. Let's first take up the concept's theorisation by the influential postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha, who came to the question of identity through his interest in colonialism. Bhabha argued that 'oriental' identities are regularly articulated in terms that are not their own but are those of the dominant faction. ('Subaltern' is a term used originally by Gramsci but which now usually refers to those social groups with the least power of all, especially colonised peoples.) Under colonialism, subaltern identity is not a pure expression of its own distinct character. Rather, the identity of subaltern groups is articulated in signifying practices that imitate and transmute concepts (or discourses) that have been articulated by the coloniser. In imitating and deflecting dominant identities and discourses, so Bhabha's argument goes, the hybrid subaltern subverts the oppressor outside any formal political struggle. Hybridised identities acquired by the dominated cause ambivalence. And they call into question the naturalness and legitimacy of hegemonic identities (see Bhabha 1994).

Second, in a rather different account, hybridity is a useful concept because groups and individuals do not have a single identity but several. In particular, as Stuart Hall argued in his work on ethnicity, the term 'black' in Britain pulled together various very different groups coming from various places around the world. And its heterogeneity lent it power. It meant for instance that the 'black' identity could not call upon myths of a past to consolidate itself, and that it could not easily settle back into assumptions of shared culture. This 'difference in unity' demanded a politics of process in which what was different between members of one identity was as important as what was shared, and which prevented any kind of monolithic culture becoming its objective (Stuart Hall 1992). It required alliances and exchanges between different groups in situations where a political group was formed on its basis.

These concepts have been criticised because, for all their openness, they remain based upon a logic and politics of opposition in which identities remain, at base, distinct from one another and determining of social action. Thus, in the words of Robert Young, hybridity 'always reiterates and reinforces the dynamics of the same colonial social economy whose tensions and divisions it re-entwines in its own antithetical structure' (Young 1995, 77). The concept of hybridity does not move sufficiently past identity politics. But this critique is rather removed from everyday life where so much is ordered by identities. It seems to be making a theoretical and utopian rather than a practical point.
In 1991 Irving Kristol, one of the founding fathers of American neo-conservatism, published an editorial think-piece in the Wall Street Journal headlined 'The Tragedy of Multiculturalism'. Its main claim was that, although multiculturalism is mainly criticized because it is 'illiberal', in fact it is primarily an invention of educationalists and, as such, is a 'desperate - and surely self-defeating - strategy for coping with the educational deficiencies, and associated social pathologies, of young blacks' (Kristol 1995, 50).

By shifting the curriculum towards African American history and culture, Kristol argued, multiculturalists were degrading the civilizational value of the heritage. In words that seem to prophesy the heightened rhetoric of the war on terrorism, he declared: 'What these radicals blandly call multiculturalism is as much a “war against the West” as Nazism and Stalinism ever were' (Kristol 1995, 52).

Kristol's essay was written in the heat of the culture wars of the early nineties, and it may seem hard to imagine such statements, with their racist overtones, achieving this level of prominence anywhere else in the West today, except of course in the USA. But that would be to forget the French and German far right (Le Pen and the Republikaner party) or one-time Professor of Greek, Enoch Powell's famous 1968 'rivers of blood' speech in the UK which predicted that the continuation of Caribbean and South Asian immigration would lead to anarchy or worse. Yet it is also true that multiculturalism in the US political arena tends to mean something rather different than it does in, say, Europe or Australia: it is somewhat less connected to issues of immigration and more focussed (as in Kristol's case) on accepting blacks and Hispanics into the mainstream. (Thus it was that Spike Lee became a hero of US multiculturalism during the late 1990s.) Yet it is salutary to recall Kristol's piece not just because it demonstrates conservative thinking on this issue but because it succinctly points to two of the major critiques
of multiculturalism. According to its conservative critics, multiculturalism threatens: (1) a return to cultural barbarism through a lowering of standards or a debasement of values; and (2) liberal coercion, since under particular policies designed to enable the survival of minority cultures, limits to individual freedoms may be imposed (for instance, the law in Quebec, Canada, requiring all firms of over fifty employees to conduct business in French). And they often add a third argument, neglected here by Kristol, namely that multiculturalism will lead to a fragmentation of languages, religions and cultures within the nation so as to unravel the binding threads required for national unity.

The first of these arguments will largely be dealt with in the section on cultural value below since it turns around the proposition that value is not relative to particular cultures. But it is worth noting that the idea that multiculturalism equals barbarism is odd even in terms of the progressive vision of history that the distinction implies, given that multiculturalist policies are features precisely of the most developed, indeed of hyper-modernised, states. Multiculturalism is much weaker in the peripheries of the developed world: even in an advanced industrial state such as Japan barely accommodates it, retaining an official monomorphism which overrules the lives of immigrant Koreans and Chinese, as well as indigenous Okinawan, Ainu and Burakumin peoples. Similarly, ethnic cleansing, to take the most extreme form of anti-multiculturalism, is today more common in states where modernisation is lagging than it is in hyper-modern nations.

The second of these conservative arguments has only a tangential relation to cultural studies as such. But the third is relevant since it returns us directly to the question of the relations between nation-states and culture. Of course, what we might call hard multiculturalism - the idea that for every nation there ought to be just one culture - has obvious problems from a historical point of view. Almost all nations are, and always have been, multicultural in the sense that they contain a multitude of cultures and usually of languages and dialects. In fact, if we accept Reinhart Koselleck's theory of the emergence of the modern state then the modern state exists because of a particular form of multiculturalism. Koselleck argues that the state separated itself out of society and culture at the point (after the Thirty Years War in the mid-seventeenth century) when it became clear that national territories would have to include two religious confessions (Protestantism and Catholicism, or, in Britain's case, varieties of Protestantism), religious difference being no less a crucial indicator of difference than ethnic difference today (Koselleck 1988). The modern state was brought into being in order that individuals of different religious creeds could live peacefully together as citizens.

Indeed as the Swedish sociologist Ulf Hannerz has carefully argued: all modern societies do not just tolerate, but are built around, meanings and values that are shared by all members (Hannerz 1992, 44). A commitment to a nation can encompass differences and indeed may be strengthened by them. Perhaps nowhere is this truer than in the USA, where 'American culture' stands for a relatively restricted set of attachments that can co-exist with a number of very different religious, societal, moral and cultural preferences. This implies that the term 'culture' in 'multiculturalism' may be used fairly lightly. At any rate nationalism plays a role in unifying communities with different cultures. So we can think of nationalism either positively or negatively: as an ideological formation that prevents recognition and expression of unshared values or as an ideological formation that allows for a sense of collectivity across unshared values.

The situation changes somewhat when multiculturalism becomes official policy since such a move accepts a model of society in which various communities embrace their cultural differences. The primary point of multiculturalism is to grant full (and not just formal) citizenship to those of different cultures, in a way similar to how religious belief (within strict limits) began to cease being a criterion for citizenship in Protestant states around the end of the seventeenth century. And culture becomes important in this context because citizenship is not just a matter of holding a passport, possessing the right to vote and so on. It also consists of the capacity to contribute one's heritage, books and beliefs to the national identity: the British 'national character' or 'national body', for instance, needs to cover its citizens of colour as well as whites. At a governmental level, multiculturalism thought such as this requires accepting notions of citizenship that actively affirm difference and tends to be articulated in terms of citizens' participatory rights alongside governmental responsibility to uphold those rights (Bennett 2001, 51). This would allow us to include within European culture the contributions of the Muslims, people of African descent and Asians who live and work in Europe: a mosque in Marseilles is as French - and by the same stroke as European - as the Pari Gocourt.

Official multiculturalism emerges out of the intense difficulties faced by European politicians when they divided Central Europe into new states after World War I. The League of Nations ratified 'minority rights' for communities who did not form majorities in the new states, although as late as the thirty years in Europe, communities that we would have thought as ethnic minorities were called 'religious minorities' by administrators (Arendt 1973, 267-390). But minority rights were soon exposed as unenforceable. A situation developed in which many nations - from Germany to the USA - denied racial, ethnic or national origins, often condemning them to statelessness. After WW2, policies of denaturalisation were illegitimate (since they had paved the way for the Holocaust) while international protection of minority rights was moribund. States had to manage their own multiculturalism, although they were often slow to recognise that culture or even ethnicity was what was in question. Official multiculturalism was spurred on by large-scale immigration and in and after the fifties when improved and cheaper global communications allowed migrant communities to stay in touch with their home states and maintain their old cultural interests and dispositions. (For an
excellent account of the effects of modern media flows on diasporic identity (see Naficy 1999). Diasporic communities often have a more rigid sense of their traditional home culture than those who stay behind because nostalgia plays so important a role in their relation to it, and because they do not experience ongoing changes at home. At any rate, to some degree multiculturalism is a consequence of globalisation.

On one level multiculturalism is a governmental tool for managing difference, as when states contain large minorities with irrepressible (i.e. separatist) ambitions (for example Canada). Or, as I say, when a state contains non-hegemonic and minority communities of different races - here multiculturalism can be a means of managing not just monoculturalism but also racism (as in the USA). Conversely, in all these cases it is the state's acceptance of cultural difference under multiculturalism that triggers the conservative backlash, since such acceptance seems to loosen the grip of hegemonic groups on the apparatus of government.

It is not as if the conservatives are multiculturalism's only critics. From the left, multiculturalism has come under attack for rather different reasons. First, so the claim goes and in an argument that should by now be familiar, in appealing to the concept of 'culture' and imagining a nation-state composed of a variety of equally empowered cultures, multiculturalism closes down on differences within particular cultural groups. That is, it does not provide sufficient room for hybridity and 'identity-in-difference' in the terms spelt out in the last section (see Bhabha 1999). Second, multiculturalism tends to propose cultural solutions for political problems, by emphasising recognition and freedom of expression rather than power and economic equality (Critical Cultural Studies Group 1994). This argument is a version of the old/new left complaint against cultural studies outlined in the introduction to this book.

Another version of this argument is that states promote multiculturalism to exhibit their tolerance rather than to promote difference, as is witnessed when relatively trivial cultural modes - ethnic restaurants or festivals - are lauded under the banner of multiculturalism (see Hage 1998). And third, multiculturalism which comes under attack from the right when it is authorised and organised by the state comes under attack from the left when it is authorised and organised by the market, as instantiated by the so-called 'Benetton effect' or by internal corporate diversity policies applied for commercial ends (Gilroy 2000, 242; Critical Cultural Studies Group 1994, 115). We are familiar with this logic: in aiming to market to different communities, corporations will incorporate personnel and values connected to those communities. And a few global companies, such as Benetton, have gone further: they have incorporated a multicultural 'we are the world' feeling into their branding so that their advertisements function as advertisements for multiculturalism itself. More recently too, in a merger of market and public multiculturalism, some urban governments have promoted cultural diversity in order to make their cities attractive to globally mobile companies and highly skilled labour. Finally, there is a left argument that multiculturalism encourages essentialism: it

freezes different cultural communities into their differences, and conceives of cultures not as dynamic, ceaselessly transforming themselves, but as fixed traditions. This kind of cultural essentialism can encourage ethnic and racial prejudices (a notion which is also peddled by conservative critics).

It seems as if both left and right critiques have created an image of multiculturalism which implies a nation wherein a finite number of cultural groups remain inside hard and fast borders, living in terms of cultures that were more or less fixed either in their home countries or in times past. But it is important not to let that imaginary multiculturalism bewitch us. For, in the real world, each multiculturalism contains a variety of perspectives and values, some in conflict with others, and some mappable onto other multiculturalisms. (A conservative Islamic father and a conservative Anglican one in Britain may share something that their more open and questioning daughters do not.) And we need not to forget that individuals can belong simultaneously to different multicultural and engage in activities which are not covered by any 'culture' at all. Such possibilities need not be ruled out by multiculturalism.

Because it is so beset by enemies, multiculturalism remains a vulnerable concept and, in recent years, has often (especially in Europe) been replaced by the somewhat less contentious term 'cultural diversity'. It is sometimes claimed that 'cultural diversity' is a more appropriate term because 'multiculturalism' implies a bounded border within which different cultures co-exist, and (as we have seen) increasingly nation-state borders do not provide the framework within which cultural relations have to be considered. But it is hard to resist the sense that multiculturalism is being let go simply because it has become too controversial and beleaguered a term.

One of the problems that multiculturalism faces is that it does not fit the liberal paradigm. That is to say, if multiculturalism were simply a matter of allowing different cultures to be acknowledged, and to participate, in the nation, there might still be pertinent problems of fragmentation, but policy could always be legitimated by a clearly liberal paradigm of tolerating differences within unity. This would be a non-essentialistic liberalism, of course, which acknowledges different collective or cultural identities and interests rather than different personal identities and interests. But, as we have begun to see, this is not all that contemporary multiculturalism requires. Multiculturalism is articulated against prejudice, invisibility and exclusion, but not only against these things. It addresses the question of the survival of particular cultures within advanced commercial media cultures and under hyper-powerful governments, and not simply the question of the right of different cultures to free expression and acknowledgment unconstrained by official indifference or efforts at repression by monoculturalists and racists. For if the state does not support, say, the French language in Quebec or help maintain the Hmong language in the US Midwest or, in general, examine different curricula for different ethnic groups, then diasporic cultures may disappear. In this situation active state intervention may be required.
is an established reality in most Asian nations as well as in New Zealand for instance, where Maori and English are now both national languages. In Europe, Switzerland is the key example of the multicultural, multilingual state, historically validated as such. Belgium is another such example.

So the ideal of the mono-confessional, monocratic, monolingual, monolinguistic state cannot be defended on pragmatic grounds since other kinds of states work also. Which means that in this context nation-states are best regarded as political and economic units rather than as cultural ones. And as to the question of when the state ought to intervene in cultural practices in the name of human rights, I would suggest that case-by-case approach is what is required given that the question of what exactly constitutes a 'right' is so uncertain (see Arends 1973, 290–302). It is possible, for instance, to question whether one has a 'right' to speak just the language one is born into – even while accepting that multilingual states are more viable. Yet with an extreme instance such as FMG, there would seem few grounds to defend culture over rights. What is important to is to recognise that intervention in the name of rights in specific cases need not undercut multiculturalist policies, particularly when these are not based on static or monolithic concepts of 'culture'.

One particular problem remains when we think of multiculturalism in countries with relatively recent histories of settlement and colonisation and where colonised communities remain intact. If we take multiculturalism simply as a movement that endorses, promotes and nurtures cultural differences, then the difference between indigenous, settler and more recent migrant cultures can be lost. One of the effects of the term 'cultural diversity' is that it makes this forgetting easier; it is notable that in Tony Bennetts's 2001 policy document, presented to the Council of Europe as Different Diversities: Transversal Study on the Theme of Cultural Policy and Cultural Diversity, indigenous peoples become just another culture to be managed under the umbrella of diversity.

But the fact is that colonised people have a different relation to the settler-state and to the land than do post-settlement migrant communities and this needs to be recognised at all levels including government ones. In Australia the multicultural policies that were embraced in the 1970s did little for indigenous peoples; if anything such policies held Aborigines back. Against this, in New Zealand the official policy is 'biculturalism', which divides citizens into either Maori or Pakeha (whites). Proponents of biculuralism (and especially the Maori) have rejected multiculturalism and cultural diversity as policy options precisely because they would diminish the Maori special relation to the state and land. But indigenous exceptionalism can lead to problems of its own: Auckland, New Zealand is now a multicultural city with thousands of South Asians and Taiwanese and Hong Kong Chinese residents whom the policy of biculturalism, split as it is between Maori and Pakeha, leaves peculiarly adrift. Even more problematic, Auckland is a major Pacific Islander centre with major populations of
Race differs from concepts such as gender, class and even ethnicity in that there is a question as to whether it is real at all. Nobody doubts that the difference between men and women has a biological basis (even if there is huge debate about what that difference means, or ought to mean, socially). Few people doubt that the category of class is necessary to an accurate account of modern societies (even if there is a great deal of debate as to what actually marks one class off from another and how deep class divisions actually go). And ethnicity too is generally assumed to be more simply a piece of ideology. But race, it seems, is nothing but a dangerous product of prejudice or, at least, of false thinking. Racism, is, at its heart, the belief that the human species is constituted by a number of separate and distinct biologically discrete sub-species: i.e. races. But, as almost all scientists agree, there is no such thing as race in this sense. Tellingly, even at the height of scientific racism, racists found it difficult to decide how many races actually existed.

Yet race as a category refuses to disappear. There are several main reasons for this. First, it can return to its pre-scientific roots, to the conceptual machinery of xenophobia, to old notions about 'savages' and to long-term popular imaginary of racial stereotypes (see Japhet 1999; Hannoord 1996; Todorov 1993). In this context, races consist less of people joined by deep-seated biological traits than by the sharing of particular kinds of personalities, values and dispositions, bound to particular body types, often marked by skin colour. That kind of racism can create hierarchies and build apparatus of oppression and discrimination almost as effectively as racism based on deep biology. Hence the South Asian caste system is effectively racism since different castes are deemed to have different body types and capacities.
Second, race remains a powerful but barely visible referent in concepts such as ethnicity and multiculturalism and thence even in the concept of culture itself. Cultural differences, when they are deemed to be based on the rooted or 'ethnic' differences between peoples, are often displaced forms of race differences. In practice, it is often difficult to disjoin what is called culturalization (that idea that different peoples have different inherited cultures) from a racist node, since different cultures so often implies different kinds of people with different kinds of bodies.

Third, racism is difficult to uproot since it is based on look – the visual differences between different groups of peoples. These differences often (but not always) have a relation to differences in history, culture, language and geography, which are basically accidental or contingent, and yet at another level are not contingent at all, since a great deal of human history across the globe has been based on discriminations based largely on bodily visibility. Race may not be a true way of dividing the species but nonetheless it has helped to organise human history.

Last, and most importantly, race is experienced as such by many on a daily basis, although not by same-race majorities in most communities (which is why travelling to understand what it is like to be a member of a group with a different body type who doesn’t necessarily get understanding or respect). The everyday experience of race is extraordinarily complex but it often involves the object of continual slight, petty exclusions, changes of tone, avoidance of the gaze and over-hearty responses as well as a sense of oneself based around feelings, bodily self-awareness, values, expressive forms and manners that are not shared by most of the people you encounter. In this experience, race and culture are wholly fused.

At one level the only way to avoid racism is simply to stop using racist concepts. This would require removing the markers of race, and in particular that of skin colour, from discourses about social groups and individuals so that these markers cease. It just would not matter whether people were black or white or whatever. Another way would be to follow Tony Morrison in her argument that, for instance, Bill Clinton was, as she puts it, ‘our first black president’. Morrison reeds ‘blackness’ not as skin colour but as a socio-cultural position. Clinton came from a single-parent household; he was a ‘born poor, working-class, saxophone playing, McDonald’s and junk-food loving boy from Arkansas’ (Morrison 1998, 32). Not to added up to blackness, which, Morrison persuasively contends, helps account for the fury and vindictiveness that he stimulated among his enemies and the loyalty he found among the black community. Blackness, for Morrison, becomes detached from race: it is a cultural attribute which can be disseminated widely enough to help undo racism.

But is it possible, at the moment, to imagine a world in which racial markers either that freely or are diminished to the level of shoe size? Probably not; just because culture and society are still too organised around them; experience too is filtered through them. The history of Western racism is not yet well understood by cultural historians. It is clear, however, that something remarkable occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century: a previously fairly unimportant idea (if not unimportant prejudice) began to control a great deal of the human sciences, and hence government policy. Around 1850 the British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, could declare, ‘Race is everything, there is no other truth’, words that are cited repeatedly by the apostles of racial sciences (cited in Harnsford 1996, 312). By 1900, eugenics, for instance, which aimed to protect race purity (and hence social improvement) by controlling ‘breeding’, was a respectable science, attracting serious research funding and being implemented, albeit furtively, across the West. How was this possible? Conceptually race was, in Disraeli’s terms, ‘everything’ because it cohered nature and society: in its terms the human species was known, divided into different races, and those races each had their own ‘natures’ which determined history, culture – everything.

As I say, this was historically unprecedented: race had been used but a minor category in thinking about how society worked, even if not a minor category in organising actual social relations. What changed? The most important of the various historical forces propelling race into this central position was Darwinism. Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution as published in On the Origin of Species (1859) was not itself inherently racist since it did not rely upon the subdivision of species into races for its explanatory power (although Darwin himself did think of some races as more evolutionarily advanced than others). Rather, Darwinism allowed society and politics to be understood not as the outcome of human choices (under the way of particular interests) but as subject to invariable, deterministic biological laws, and, in particular, the laws that ordered the transmission of inherited traits across populations. This was the basis of what has come to be known as ‘scientific racism’.

But scientific racism itself implies an older concept that we can think of as Romantic. At its basis, it rested on the philological notion of the ‘Ist community (as first theorised by Herder during the late eighteenth century), a community distinguished by its authenticity and bound together by a cultural tradition – by values, myths, language and a spectrum of character types and capabilities unique to it. As it turned out, after Darwinism, races were figured as biological versions of Herder’s Volk cultures.

Scientific racism needs to be thought of in functional terms also: it cannot be regarded simply as the outcome of Darwin’s theory of species-formation. It became such a powerful idea because it fulfilled particular ideological needs in the age of imperialism, and most of all because it helped legitimate the domination of the globe by whites (although, at the same time it created new hierarchies among Europeans – as between the Anglo-Saxon and the Celts for instance (Foucault 1988)). It also allowed
whites to continue to dominate African Americans in the Americas where, even after the ending of slavery, a whole set of Jim Crow ‘race laws’ were established to prevent blacks participating fully in society, politics and the economy. Racism also helped to unite groups of Europeans dispersed across the globe under the impulsion of capitalism and colonialism. Certainly Europeans, of whatever nationality or religion or gender or even culture, were joined together globally as members of the ‘white’ race (even if, once again, whiteness was not a marker of race at all and various whites, according to scientific racism, belonged to various races). Radio-phonically, racism was also propelled by egalitarianism. It is as if once all human beings were deemed equal, systemic inequality could only be maintained by declaring some kinds of people less than fully human – and racism could do that.

One key effect of racism was radically to downgrade the lives and identities of mixed races. Demophobia as ‘half-castes’, ‘mestizos’ (people of mixed blood) were a particular affront to racism, not just because, in cases where whites had sex with people of colour, the assumption of white superiority and autonomy was threatened, but because they provided living testimony of cross-racial solidarity and mixing, and indeed of the artificiality of hard biological definitions of racial purity.

Today, as we know, racism works purely ideologically. Inside a shared culture, in most cases it works by distinguishing other peoples by virtue of their race, so that people ‘like us’ are unmarked by race. However in cases where whites are under threat and/or in hard competition with people of different skin colours and ethnicities (poor whites in the industrial USA or white workers today whose jobs are threatened by coloured immigrants or by job flight to Asia), racism can help whites accrue imaginary freedoms and superiority to themselves, and white racism can flare up (see Frankenberg 1997; Allen 1994; Rodgerer 1991). And racism, in the era of post-racism, works differently in different nations. As I have said previously, it is widely dispersed globally but (in China) Han racism works very differently than does say German racism in relation to Turkish immigrants, which is different again to the milder quasi-racism of fair-skinned peoples of colour in relation to those of darker skins in the Caribbean and South America. Here something like a race difference involves no cultural difference.

Most powerfully and typically, racism organizes certain stereotypes: races are regarded as groups of similar individuals who possess a narrow set of traits, usually, but not necessarily, negative traits. Notions such as ‘all Africans have got rhythm’ or ‘Africans are brainy’ are racist, although not as dangerous as notions such as ‘Jews are dishonest and mean’ or ‘Indians are lazy’. Some people will even claim that they’re not racist because they so admire Asian diligence for instance. Racist imagery of this kind regards individuals not so much as individuals as such or even as belonging to other collectivities (to localities or classes say) but primarily as members and representatives of a race imagined as a bundle of stereotypes and dispositions. Groups or individuals within racialised communities whom these stereotypes cannot cover become more or less invisible; thus, for instance, one of the more under-mediated groups in the USA is the African American upper-middle class.

Race characteristics inform gender stereotypes in particular: African American masculinity (hyper-rudeness and threatening), Asian femininity (hyper-feminine and submissive) being two key instances. This melding of race and gender intensifies differences on both registers. Furthermore, it is not just the case that racialised individuals are read through and measured against stereotypes but that their behaviour is likely to be regarded as ‘typical’, as confirming such stereotypes. This kind of cultural racism subsumes the downfall of institutional racism – that is, racism that formally bars some races from venues to neighbourhoods, clubs, etc. And cultural racism is especially damaging in that it can so easily be internalised by members of oppressed races themselves.

The primary difficulty with the concept of race today is that it is so tightly connected to that of ethnicity. As we know, formally the concepts seem easy enough to distinguish: race in a biological notion while ethnicity is a cultural one. And yet ethnicity is in fact very connected to illusion and blood: people of the same ethnicity share not just cultures but a network of family relations, roots, more or less primordial – if often mythical – connection to a particular home territory. Race mediates between society and nature, ethnicity mediates between race and culture. Leaving aside particular cases where epidermal hierarchies exist outside of ethnic differences, the key distinction between race and ethnicity is that ethnicity seems not to be damaged by the history of racism, so that while today race is almost never a source of individual or group pride (and, when it is, it is treated with intense suspicion), ethnicity can be just such a source of pride. Indeed, the distinction still works divisively: people of African descent are much more often represented as sharing a race (especially in the USA where racial difference between blacks and whites is routinely conceded) than, say, whites or Jews who are represented in terms of ethnicity only. Or the streets in Angolan countries, an ‘ethnic’ is a member of a migrant community. Australians with a British genealogy, for instance, are not ethnic at all so far as most Australians are concerned.

The difference between ethnic cultures and other kinds of subcultures (such as those formed around taste or generation) is that, being so deeply embedded in history and geography, they are particularly powerful markers of identity (‘I’m Serbian’ implies more than ‘I’m a punks’ ever did). And they can be figured as forms of resistance to the processes of modernity. Indigenous ethnic cultures exist as survivors of the destructive power of colonialism, while more mobile and metropolitan ethnic cultures exist as ‘differences’ that need to be preserved against homogenising global flows. Multiculturalism, as we have seen, is the state’s recognition of the power of ethnic identity to establish identity. Yet ethnicities are not simply positively affirmed; they are also often responses to the past discriminations that defined them. To put this slightly differently, many ethnic identities are not so strong simply because they are self-generated, but...
because historically they have been used by dominant groups to pick out and subject particular groups of people. Communities such as the Romany and the Jews who have survived millennia of severe, often murderous, even genocidal, exile prejudice, are perhaps the most notable instances of this complex dialectic of ethnic self-affirmation and external discrimination, and, ironically, have often been blamed for failing to assimilate.

Racism and ethnicism are both, then, forms of identity politics, and like all identity politics (as noted above) they neglect the history of interactions with others out of which particular ethnicities and cultures emerge and within which they are maintained. Since the eighties there has been a fascination with moments of 'first contact', the first time indigenous peoples from wherever encountered whites for instance. Such encounters represent moments of purity: a glimpse of true mutual otherness. These moments form the mythic foundations for a politics of difference. But such moments are very rare. In fact, what history over and over again reminds us is that peoples are interconnected: the sweep of cultural exchanges has been much wider, covering greater distances, than localist and ethnically orientated thinking has typically acknowledged. This means that interrelatedness (imitations, distinctions, transformations, mixings) is the norm of cultural formation. It follows from this that 'hybridity' is not some valuable and counter-hegemonic exception. Rather, it is a norm. Almost all races, ethnicities and cultures are hybridised — which makes it a weaker, more banal concept than cultural theorists such as those discussed in the previous section have supposed, while at the same time it undermines the case for monoculturalism and ethnocentric purism.

Racism poses a challenge to cultural studies because it represents an impossible form of identity politics. It is because of this that it has been especially important to the development of the discipline. In Britain the realisation that racism was used routinely by government (and in particular the police) to produce law-and-order panics that confirmed bourgeois hegemony (Gilroy 1987) quickly led to critique of the discourse of racism which further fed into the theorisation of hybridity. But the idealism of those forms of critical theory which argued that a progressive practical politics could be mounted via concepts such as 'identity in difference' and the emphasis on how individuals uniquely combine various subject-positions has long been apparent. Hence anti-racist analysis has had to follow another path. No one has been more important to the articulation of anti-racist analysis within cultural studies than Paul Gilroy, whose Against Racism presents the case against promoting and accepting identity based on race (by which he also means ethnicity) with most vigour, although it must be noted that the work focuses almost completely on black identity.

Such a case might seem to be uncontroversial, but, as Gilroy implies, those who identify themselves as blacks, Jews, Irish, Chinese and so on (which, of course, means pretty much everyone across the globe), by appealing to racial categories, belong to the history of what he calls 'raciology' — the legitimation of what Franz Fanon called the 'epidermalization of difference' (i.e. basing human differences on skin colour).

Vernacular forms of identity, therefore, share something with fascism and Nazism, and Gilroy's book explores what that something is. Part of Gilroy's argument is the familiar one: that all racial/ethnic thinking relies on the values of groundedness, rootedness and traditional community — values which ignore, first, the dependence of modern racial identities on advanced technology and commercial culture and, second, internal differences within racial groups. He emphasises the way that, since the Nazi, race-thought has emphasised the visual rather than the discursive (despite many of his examples of contemporary black culture coming from the world of music).

The most interesting part of Gilroy's thesis is his account of what is happening to black culture now. For Gilroy, strong contemporary black culture has moved far away from Afro-centrism. It has accepted its diasporic status. Indeed it has lost the political and utopian longings for freedom that inflamed slave societies (the crucial moment here being the ending of South African apartheid in 1989). Longings for freedom have been displaced onto what he calls 'a radicalised biopolitics', a fervent concentration on and celebration of the (heterosexual) body and sexuality, in which identity becomes attached to the body (Gilroy 2000, 185). Radicalised body politics does not belong to the 'street' (which, he argues, has stopped being a local community and has come to be regarded as a site of conflict and danger and the object of policing) but in settings on the boundary between the public and private, for example the basketball court. And aspects of black body culture have entered global consciousness in alliance with US cultural power — most notably, through sports superstars such as Michael Jordan and commercial rap music. Here blackness has come to represent a 'strange, hyperhuman hybrid of ultramodern and ultraprimitive' (2000, 347).

Gilroy's argument urges the end of raciology, and yet his book, like others on African American culture in particular, leaves the reader with the sense that globalised societies and cultures are finding more and more ways to use race as a niche for marketing; as a source of commodifiable, imaginary representations which can energise popular cultures; as a way of dividing and weakening the transnational labour force; and as a source of identity pride especially, but not only, for the marginalised and unprivileged. What is perhaps most useful about Gilroy's work is its insistence that racism changes constantly; reading this as a sign of its continued strength, only the most vigilant politics and critique will ever be able to unravel it.

Further reading