Introduction

Identity Politics: The Past, the Present, and the Future

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What is identity? Is identity recognition of a shared characteristic that enables a solidarity with members of a group? And does it conversely entail distance from those who lack this common feature? Or, is identity a social construction that ebbs and flows, is always in process, multilayered, and fragmented? What is gender? As a defining identity, does it fit the former or the latter conceptualization?

These questions are at the heart of understanding how identity politics affects social movements and, in particular for this book, the women’s movement. The women’s movement is a gender-focused movement. Yet, within the category of women there are other identities that work to keep women from recognizing gender commonalities. For instance, living in a largely segregated society, women of color feel a bonding with men of color that they do not usually feel with white women (Bell-Scott 1994; Collins 1990; Dill 1983; Fleming 1993; McKay 1993). Likewise, studies of lesbian feminist communities reveal the positive aspects of joining together to find acceptance and emotional support where it is lacking in the straight world (Franzen 1993; Kreiger 1982, 1983; Taylor and Whittier 1992).

Proponents of identity politics believe it important to affiliate with those who confront similar experiences based on social group characteristics. Members of an oppressed group may organize to change their situation, as well as their feelings of self-worth and place in the social structure. Hence, social characteristics that have been used to exclude certain groups have led to social movements organized by those groups to change their condition.

Critics of identity politics assert that it leads to further marginalization and that it prevents uniting with those who are working on similar issues but who differ in physical/social features (Gitlin 1993). Class, too, is left out of this analysis, as are differences within groups, which may have everyday practical consequences (Allison 1993). Indeed, Hall (1996:4–5) argues that unities based on essentialist identities are constructed within the dynamics of power and exclusion, “and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of a naturally constituted unity.” And problematically, as Grossberg (1996:88) points out, groups organized around their own model of repression often lack the capability of creating alliances with others.
The selections in this book explore arguments both in favor of and opposed to separate organizing based on identity factors of and beyond gender. These papers look at the role of identity for creating group distinctions, the relationship between identity politics and new social movement theory, the effects of the loss of class analysis, and the overall impact of essentialism on the women’s movement.

The articles cover a broad range of identity claims, including gender, race, class, sexual orientation, sexual practice, ethnicity, religion, age, occupation, disability, and politics. They employ a variety of writing styles, ranging from personal narrative to empirical research. The first section lays out the critiques of identity politics, and is followed by two sections discussing why identity claims are necessary. These initial sections lay the groundwork for understanding the debate; subsequent chapters cover types of identity claims, successful attempts to work with diverse interests, and a look to the future.

Critiques

Postmodern thought sees identity as a process rather than a fact or deterministic force. Yet, recognizable identity traits continue to draw people together and to provide them with support for attempting social change. This means identity and identity politics are serious contenders in the political process and social movement arenas.

Eric Hobsbawm (1996) points out that in the late 1960s the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences had no entry under identity. Thus, Hobsbawm sees identity politics as a recent phenomenon. He also sees it as a problematic category. First, he argues that a collective identity is defined against others and is based not on what their members have in common but, rather, on differences between them when, in fact, “we” may have little in common except not being the “others.” Second, no one has only a single identity; yet, identity politics leads one to disclaim other identities. And finally, identities are not fixed—they depend on contexts, which can change.

Hobsbawm places his discussion of identity politics within a claim of universalism of the Left. He is particularly partisan to the Labour Party in Britain, the party of class, of “equality and social justice” (1996:42). In applying Hobsbawm’s work to the women’s movement, it is striking to note that he does not consider gender (or race and sexual orientation) as legitimate identities separate from class. Nevertheless, he presents a critique of identity politics that raises important points.

Todd Gitlin (1995), like Hobsbawm, calls for a Left politics based on class position. However, his analysis is somewhat different, fashioned on a contemporary and North American model. According to Gitlin, the most serious and negative identity politics is white men who fear identity gains will come at their expense. But he is also opposed to identity politics in general because he feels it cultivates unity only within special groups, and there is an obsession with difference leading to the “borders identity politics draws” (severson and stanhope 1998).

Rather than organizing to reduce inequalities between rich and poor, Gitlin
argues that identity politics struggles to change the color of inequality. And, what we need to be doing, instead, is to tend mutualities. Identity politics, according to Gitlin, (1992:236) has failed to tend and, even worse, has left the centers of power uncontested.

Gitlin calls for a Left politics that includes everyone, a common—a cause of all. Although his argument is compelling in many ways, he barely mentions gender. Socialist feminists in the 1960s and 1970s explicitly pointed out how the inclusion of “all” in the Left of their day did not include them. When leftist writers in the late 1990s have little to say specifically to gender, are we to believe them? Does commonality leave women’s “difference” out? Is leftist universalism like postmodern and deconstructionist analysis, wiping away all difference, even denying there is difference because there is no reality? Does identity politics as we know it in the women’s movement leave the centers of power uncontested? These questions raised by leftist scholars present serious critiques of identity politics.

Feminist analysis also contains critiques of identity politics. Daphne Patai (1992), for instance, discusses the zealousness of feminist adherents to control thought and appearance, what she calls “ideological policing.” Patai objects to the assumption that one’s racial/ethnic identity is the same as one’s views. Even more, she believes there has been a reversal of privilege, now residing with women of color, in which no white person can challenge their vision of reality. These inclinations have led to concern for the “dogmatism turn” identity politics has presented to women’s studies. In her experience, Eurocentric became a slur and teaching courses on other racial/ethnic groups was not accepted of a North American white.

Further, Patai (1992:83) questions the ways identity politics gets used in a scarce job market, calling it “the fraud that accompanies familiar old ambitions dressed up in appropriate ideology.” Patai feels distress that these tendencies have arisen and, even more, that they are not discussed. Instead, identity politics has led to silencing. She considers her writing on these issues to be a defense of feminism.

Others also point to problems within feminism, particularly the focus on personal experience, which may have isolated the women’s movement from more general social change struggles. Often, rather than oppression’s being fought in the wider society, struggles are being fought on local levels (Adams 1989). L. A. Kaufman (1990) takes a more nuanced look at identity politics, dividing it into political and nonpolitical frameworks. Kaufman dates the beginning of identity politics not with black women’s challenge to sisterhood but to the civil rights movement of Martin Luther King and the Black Power movement, where activists called for a new collective identity to offset white imperialism. In turning to the women’s movement, Kaufman credits Kate Miller’s Sexual Politics (1970) with defining gendered power as politics—structured relationships whereby one group controls another. In the 1980s and 1990s, though, she fears identity politics has evolved into fragments where “the noton of solidarity, so central to any progressive politics” is lost (Kaufman 1990:76).

Kaufman (1990:78) makes the point that the increasing movement of self-transformation (as political change) leads to thinking that problems are attitudes rather than power differentials and vested interests. Like Patai, she sees this leading
to an emphasis on lifestyle (who one reads, what one eats or wears) rather than on the actions one takes. Still, Kauffman calls for using identity as entry to challenging institutions of power, and as politics intent upon both social and individual transformation.

A central issue of importance is whether difference has displaced inequality as a central concern of social movements. As Anne Phillips (1997) points out, an injustice perspective seeks to eliminate differentiation used against powerless groups, and difference perspectives are intent on highlighting these differences. She cites the dilemma between strategies that are meant to diminish the significance of gender and strategies that focus on the intrinsic worth of one's sex.

Hazel Carby (1990) adds another perspective when she questions whether the emphasis on diversity in feminist thought and practices is a way to avoid the politics of race, even as it appears that race is being confronted. Similarly, the disjunction between inclusive feminism and the reality of the organizations that make up the women's movement raises the crucial point "on whose behalf" inclusive ideologies are meant (Leidner 2001).

Identity Claims

In spite of critical questions associated with identity politics, there are important rationales for the development of a politics of identity, beginning with The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir's (1953) classic work. Her introduction sets the tone, unveiling a gendered identity politics by calling women "the other." By this, she means that women have failed to identify themselves as a group because they are considered a part of man (the subject) and, thus, are not segregated into their own group, as are some racial and ethnic groups. They have no history or religion that is particularly their own. She calls for women to see themselves as a group in order to change their situation.

De Beauvoir's writings inspired a collective conscience of women, which laid the foundation for the reemergence in the 1960s of women's activism in their own behalf. Yet, by the early 1980s, writings by women of color spoke to the need to clarify an identity of their own. They formulated a base for organizing around that identity, even if it separated women from one another. The Combahee River Collective, a group of black feminists and forerunner to this claim, began meeting in 1974. They issued the first statement on black feminism, twelve years after the contemporary women's movement emerged and many more years after the U.S. publication of The Second Sex. The statement combined gender and race identity. Black women proclaimed the task of combating simultaneous oppressions as theirs because other movements failed to acknowledge their specific oppression. They named what they were doing "identity politics" based on their conclusion that "the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us" (Combahee River Collective 1978:275).

How did white feminists react to this challenge? Some were angry or dismissive. Some had already reached this awareness. Others welcomed it. Still others strug-
gled with their past and worked to become multicultural in their feminist thought and actions, even as this became a painful process of stripping away their own identity, deciding what to keep, what to eliminate, what to change (Pratt 1984). This difficult process involved the acknowledgment of another’s existence while not denying one’s own. For instance, Minnie Bruce Pratt (1984:73) describes her fears as she tries to understand herself in “relation to folks different from me, when there are discussions, conflicts about anti-Semitism and racism among women, criticisms, criticisms of me; when, for instance in a group discussion about race and class, I say I feel we have talked too much about race, not enough about class, and a woman of color asks me in anger and pain if I don’t think her skin has something to do with class.”

Part of the problem in understanding “other worlds” is that women grow up learning different gender roles. For example, in many Native American groups women are strong and valued (Allen 1993), whereas other women have had to work at developing that consciousness. And having acquired an ideology of strength and independence, what happens if you become disabled or when you grow old (Kline 1992)?

Multiple Identities and Changing Identities

An obvious complexity within the field of identity politics is the reality of multiple identities, including those we are in the process of becoming or losing. Audré Lorde, (1984a:41) who called upon women to speak—“your silence will not protect you”—used her life as an example of how we can rid ourselves of others’ distortions by reclaiming all our identities so we can define them for ourselves.

As a forty-nine-year-old black lesbian socialist feminist, who was also a mother of two and part of an interracial couple, Lorde discussed her many group identities, including acquired identities that did not fit into acceptable society. This makes life difficult, and yet, she notes it is oppressed people who are expected to bridge the gap between their differences with more privileged groups. Lorde asserted that it is not the differences among us that separate us; it is the refusal to recognize the differences. An example she cites is the idea of “sisterhood.” In a famous quote, she tells us: “Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you, we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying” (Lorde 1984b:119).

In applying a wide lens, Lorde also talked about differences within black communities. Where racism is a living reality, differences within groups seem dangerous and suspect. The need for unity is often misnamed as a need for homogeneity, and a black feminist vision mistaken for betrayal. There is a refusal of some black women to recognize and protest against their oppression as women within the black community and of heterosexual women against lesbians, particularly among black women. She urged women to identify with one another and develop new ways of being in this world and new ways for this world to be. For, as she tells us,
“the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 1984b:123). In line with Lorde’s analysis of divisions within groups, Marilyn Frye (1992) makes clear that even in what appears to be a cohesive commonality (in this case a lesbian community) there are substantial differences that must be acknowledged and worked through.

The necessity for claiming more than one identity is also true for Chicanas (Nieto 1997), Asians (Shah 1994), and women in developing countries. Like African American women, members of these racial/cultural groups often find U.S. feminism’s focus on male/female relations alienating because they, too, are working against multiple oppressions of gender, class, race, and nationalism. But they add a difference to the experiences of African American women, where much of identity politics has been focused, and that is invisibility, which for them, is another form of oppression (Friedman 1995). Moreover, not all Third World women are women of color and not all women of color are Third World or poor. Hispanic women have reported experiencing racism through the rejection of black sisters because of being light skinned (Quintanales 1983), and class is a dividing agent among women of all nationalities and races.

Regardless of the identity issues that may divide them, feminists are concerned that in the rush to acknowledge and celebrate difference, the relations of power that create that difference are often ignored. Women of color, in particular, find the current popularity of diversity rhetoric all too often offers a decontextualized politics of difference, which turns out to be another way of preserving stratified social arrangements (Aguilar 1995).

In another vein, Carol Queen (1997) voices an unwelcome (at least for some) claim to feminist identity. Queen finds that sex radicals (regardless of race, class, ethnicity, or sexual orientation) have been silenced in the women’s movement. She questions what it is that separates women who are opposed to sex work from those who do it, and why feminism does not take a more thoughtful look at this divide. She asks feminists to confront their “whorephobia” and agree to a dialogue, for she believes women have much to learn from sex workers.

The complexity of multiple identities is poignantly voiced by June Jordan (1985). From a vacation experience in the Bahamas she finds that, compared to the Bahamian people, she is a rich American woman. She is dismayed to find herself, as well as other black Americans (and whites), arguing prices on handmade items. Jordan uses this story to raise awareness of the complex interplay of race, class, and gender identity. She notes that she and the women workers are engaged in interactions that preclude seeing themselves as a united group of women. Jordan wonders how women are to connect with such different life circumstances, particularly when many women do not feel poor women’s issues of poverty and crime are theirs. She asks, “Why aren’t they everyone’s?”

Jordan’s story shows that race, class, and gender are not automatic paths of connection; there are differences within identities that have been imposed.
Voices of African American Women

It was African American women in the early 1980s, more than any other group, who confronted the women's movement on identity politics issues. There was a desire for a more pluralistic approach to “sisterhood” that recognized similarities and differences among women (Dill 1983). Bernice McNair Barnett (1995:207) makes the interesting and telling remark that the barring of black women from the League of Women Voters in Montgomery, Alabama, showed that “it was white women, rather than black women, who placed their primary emphasis on race over gender.” She also points out that the 1940s and 1950s were not a period of “doldrums” for women activists, as has been claimed for the women’s movement (see Rupp and Taylor 1987). These were years of activism for black women in the civil rights movement, a movement dedicated to issues of freedom and equality.

Taking a different approach, Barbara Smith (1983) succinctly discusses the reasons feminism frightens black and Third World men and why they resist it. In her introduction to Home Girls, an early contribution to writings by black women, Smith shows why black women need a movement of their own. Revealing another perspective some ten years later, Ann duCille (1994) wonders if the effort to promote black women's lives has not gone too far. As a black woman who has long studied black women, she acknowledges having mixed feelings about this rise of “the occult of black womanhood.” For instance, she questions the career-enhancing path women academics, white and black, have gained by claiming a “new” specialness for women of color and those who focus on them.

New questions are raised, such as looking at white middle-class women who are “housewives” to their husbands and the black working-class domestics they employ (Kaplan 1995). Both groups of women are in roles of serving others, but the white women exist with race and class privilege by means of their domestics. One conclusion, which can be drawn from this relationship, is that white women collude with the patriarchal/capitalist system that oppresses women. Another conclusion is that domestic workers enable white middle-class women to avoid confronting their spouses about sharing household duties (Kaplan 1995:81). Moreover, household help releases the middle-class woman to become a woman of leisure or to have a career. The ways that women treat other women (using domestics as an example) may help explain why many black women stay away from the (white) feminist movement.

Sexuality and Sexualities

A second area of identity contestation centers on questions of sexual orientation and preference. One of the onerous aspects of heterosexual society is the normative expectation of appropriate sexual behavior that excludes homosexuality, bisexuality, sadomasochism, or transsexuality. Dichotomous thinking, rather than a continuum model of sexual identity, had long been critiqued within the feminist movement, yet it arose in the 1980s among lesbian feminists. These divisions revealed
that there are exclusions and antagonisms among gays that differ from the full acceptance of sexual expression found in queer theory or, in the past, in the lesbian concept of the “woman-identified woman” (Radicallesbians 1970).

One challenge to agreed-upon thought was the deconstruction of commonly held views of sex workers, that is, to see them as workers deserving of workers’ rights. Women in unions, armed with feminist ideologies, concretely address many of the issues of the women’s movement—sexual harassment, maternity benefits, parental leave, and comparable worth (Chernow and Moir 1995). Yet, in the debates over prostitution and pornography, feminists who have argued for other women workers have not taken up these workers’ cause (Alexander 1997).

There are differences within lesbianism, within feminism, and even within radical feminism. Eileen Bresnahan (2001) humorously relates an incident where the “original” radical feminists (with roots in the Left) collided with newer radical feminists, who were called cultural feminists. She laments the shift away from political process to lifestyle affirmation that she saw occurring in the mid-1970s. For her, this shift left an ambiguous meaning of radical feminism and was also a departure from the past, when being a radical feminist meant that one accepted definite agreed-upon principles of radical politics. Bresnahan explains her distrust of cultural feminism as the end product of her seriousness about feminist identity. She states that because “I’m a working-class woman who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, the women’s movement was the first time I took myself seriously and the first time I was taken seriously by others whom I could also respect.” Thus, the challenge to agreed-upon thought was unwelcome in her mind and in her radical feminist circle.

What is a lesbian—who counts—is a continuing theme of sexuality inquiry. Divisions are found among lesbian feminists based on bisexuality, dress, associations, s/m practices, gender roles, and transgendered people. The 1970s woman-identified women represented a sisterhood against the patriarchy; 1990s lesbians aligned with gay men. Young lesbians have focused more on sex than political theory and often call themselves queer or “bad girls” rather than lesbians. These generational differences have led to clashes between lesbian feminism and queer ideologies. Problematically, these clashes have also raised charges of who is a real or fake lesbian, for example, what if you have a heterosexual past? The essentialism (true lesbian) of the 1970s is now confronted with more than one model for lesbian behavior. And even though this may seem confusing, as Vera Whisman (1993:58) says, “[T]he truth is, most of us sometimes feel incredibly queer, at other times indelibly female.”

One highly contested issue that has created division among lesbian feminists is sadomasochism. Shane Phelan considers it a mistake for activists to get involved in arguments of this kind, an issue that is rooted in the identity politics of what feminism is. By this, she does not mean that identity politics should be abandoned; rather, she asks that we be more careful in distinguishing “the sorts of identity issues that are vital to our growth and freedom from those that are not” (Phelan 1989:133).

Other, more “acceptable” divisions among lesbians have been identified as class, age, and ideology. Trisha Franzen discovered that lesbian-feminist university students consider being a transvestite be tainted with basis for politics occurred at the third wave. In research requires different orienting the world to be the hour. From these often shift and assume what identity group one is a member of. And questions arise.

And, what is the possibility of other genders? Of the Jewish women, of the viewpoint of African American women? Male. The Organization for what that will eventually become an identity then, an identity formation. Most of the vestiges left in the identity p
dents considered the butch/fem roles played by many working-class-bar lesbians to be tainted with heterosexuality. Thus, she argues that “sexuality is a problematic basis for political solidarity among women” (Franzen 1993:903). A similar dispute occurred at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival over the admittance of transsexuals. In researching this issue, Joshua Gamson (1997:183) argues that identity requires difference and that building collective identities requires not simply pointing out commonalties but also marking off “who we are not.” He finds these acts to be the boundary patrol of identity politics.

From these examples we can see that sexual identities and political affiliations often shift and are always contingent (Whisman 1993:58). Hence, we can no longer assume what the foundation of identical politics presumes; that is, the idea that identity groups, in this case lesbians, share an identity and therefore a politics. Even more pointed at the turn of the twenty-first century is to recognize that sexual identity, indeed all identities, are more provisional than most people realize. As Arlene Stein (1997) discussed in her research on ex-lesbians, there was a restructuring of the identity process based on situational factors that some feminists went through as they moved into lesbianism in the 1970s and out of it by the 1980s.

More Diversities — More Identities

While major divisions have arisen over issues of race and sexual diversity, there are other gender-plus identities that confront the women’s movement. There is the issue of Jewish feminists and their place in the movement (Beck 1988), of age from the older woman’s perspective (Macdonald 1995), as well as of the younger feminist viewpoint (Dietzel 1999; Heywood and Drake 1997; Looser and Kaplan 1997; Walker 1992). Inclusion itself has been questioned. For instance, Rosa María Pegueros (2001) reports on her own experience as a Latina activist in the National Organization for Women (NOW). Achieving a high, visible position, she questions what that means for her. Is she a token, a traitor to her group, or an accepted member of a feminist elite (and does she want this)? What she has to say raises questions about the sincerity of inclusion some groups are promoting.

And, what of men? How does being a male feminist affect one’s identity? There is the possibility that male feminism may be seen as a traitorous identity, indeed, traitorous perhaps to both men and women (Bettie 2001). Although it is self-evident that not all men are powerful, there is a danger in pointing out how men, too, are oppressed. This can be seen as a denial of the history and meaning of gender power relations. De-essentializing identity categories may be a necessary corrective to the conventional application of identity politics, but we must be careful not to become, then, an identity skeptic, refusing to recognize gender, race, and other identities (Bettie 2001).

Cutting across identity concerns is always the issue of class and class transformation. Moving from the working class to the middle class does not mean one has left all vestiges of one’s background behind. Class has not been adequately explored in identity politics, perhaps because of the simultaneous desire to both reject and to
retain this cultural identity. The challenge is to maintain a vigilant awareness of the inherent power these relations present while guarding against incorrect parallelisms, which can erase the political histories of difference (Bettie 2001).

The history of division within women’s studies is legendary. Indeed, one could say that women’s studies is itself identity politics (Perry 1995). Yet, in spite of the contentious debates over the category of women in the academy, the term *woman* has not been so starkly problematized in the larger society. Women of all races, ethnicity, sexual orientation (and preferences) are disadvantaged in a society that does not value women.

There are other divisions among women that are not covered in these readings. Women in revolutions, prisons, and armed services, and those living in rural areas are not found in this book. What is their relationship to other women and to feminism? What about differences between single and married women? Or those with or without children?

Divisions are often magnified when we begin to talk of global feminism and organizing transnationally to unite women from around the world. In Yemen in 2000, the Women’s Studies Program at San’a University was closed down and the director fled the country because of the use of the word *gender* (Abu-naissance 2000). In Kuwait, women continue to be told they are not to be allowed the vote. How can women join together in India, where women are divided by caste? In what ways can Muslim women organize when ideas of a constructed gender identity are considered a Western concept? There is fear that a transnational unity of women might raise a counterargument, and perhaps repression, from conservative and religious forces that have used biological determinism in order to maintain gender segregation.

At the same time, within countries, it must be recognized that the ideological and political realities women face limits the kinds of issues that can be raised. For instance, Raka Ray (1999) studied women’s activism in Bombay and Calcutta, two cities that are similar in many ways. Both have colonial histories where British influence was substantial. The legacy of colonialism is a distinct class of Western-educated citizenry, along with the more common profile of the deep poverty experienced by most of the population. Although Bombay is more prosperous than Calcutta, in general the socioeconomic conditions are more alike than different. The demographic characteristics of sex ratio, marriage age, household size, female literacy, marital status, slum population, and religious affiliation are nearly the same. There is a female labor force difference, although not a consequential one. In Calcutta the official rate is 7 percent; in Bombay, 11 percent. In other words, in neither location does one find high rates of women’s labor force participation outside the informal sector, where pay is low and workers are undercounted in official statistics.

Why, then, does the women’s movement in these cities differ to such a great extent? Ray’s cogent analysis points to differences in political fields. Calcutta is ruled by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and the government is marked by a centralized dominant power structure. To wit, Calcutta, through the CPI (M) has a hegemonic political field. The largest and most visible women’s organization is the women’s front. The women’s front is not the women or the economy (a maligned term), but the women’s organization and the women’s movement.

With a disaffected female population (the Pow,” the most powerful forum), is it possible that other women might challenge patriarchal organization and the political system? The answer is yes, but the resistance has been minimal because of the women’s movement’s incapacity to defend women’s rights.

A telling example of the causal explanation of women’s movement is the “anarchic nature” of women’s movement (Ray 1999:12). As difficult a concept to draw back to the leadership of women, the leadership of women is expressed in a way that is backward. The woman is a flawed “leader” of the leaders’ time, women international.

After this country brought women’s movement, the challenge and identity. Successes
is the women’s wing of the party; and “women’s issues” such as dowry and kitchen fires are not raised because they do not affect “human” problems, class relations, or the economy. Approved issues are jobs, clean water, poverty, or literacy. Feminist (a maligned term) concerns that address women’s subordination or appear to challenge patriarchal power are not legitimate political issues. An autonomous women’s organization was able to be feminist but lacked the ability to be heard. In Calcutta’s homogenous political culture, there is constraint from above.

With a dispersed political field and heterogeneous political culture in Bombay, the most powerful women’s organization, Forum for the Oppression of Women (the Forum), is politically autonomous. The women’s wing of the CPI(M) is in a much weaker position. Rather than one dominant political party, there are three main contenders for rule: the Congress, a nationalist right-wing Hindu party, and various coalitions on the Left. In Bombay, there is little to be gained by joining with a political party. Feminist groups raise their own issues; they are free to push for change on the personal, economic, and social levels. Strong social movement activism has been generated around issues of sex-selection abortions (Ray [1999] cites one report of 7,999 out of 8,000 abortions occurring after amniocentesis determined female fetuses), violence against women, and gender equality.

A telling difference in activists’ descriptions of rape are the Calcutta feminists’ causal explanation of poverty or abnormality compared to the Forum’s analysis of rape as “an instrument of power used by all men to keep all women in their place” (Ray 1999:127).

**Overcoming Identity Divisions**

As difficult as identity politics can be, there are many stories of confronting, and sometimes overcoming, divisions among women activists, particularly if we are drawn back to the highly Eurocentric ways of early international women’s groups. Leadership came solely from Western Europe and North America, and attitudes expressed Western societies as “the pinnacle of progress for women in contrast to backward ‘Eastern’ ways” (Rupp 1996:10). Leaders believed that the women’s cause was the same everywhere; they were, in essence, promoting the first ideals of a flawed “sisterhood.” Decisions to hold conferences were always considered within the leaders’ own boundaries in order to realize a smaller burden in terms of travel, time, and money even as they maintained that they were interested in recruiting women from less advanced nations in order to make their organization truly international.

After many such oversights, they did try to recruit autonomous groups from other countries; however, in bringing in women from around the world they also brought in nationalistic disputes, such as that between Palestinian and Israeli women. Women from developing countries, once they did participate, began to challenge imperialism. In these ways, these activists began the dialogue of difference and identity among women early this century.

Successes have been obtained in small countries with limited resources, which
require coalition work and the necessity of crossing class and racial divides, which exist in every country. These efforts have worked across geographical and nationalist barriers in Latin America, in spite of nationalistic conflicts, on the basis of the common oppression of women in these countries (Carillo 1990). In Latin America, it was necessary for women to form an independent women’s movement, separate from the Left, which had always considered women’s role in social change efforts to be secondary; it was also necessary to organize separately from European and North American women in order to form a movement on their own terms. Clearly, building alliances with Third World and industrialized countries must be premised on maintaining respect for others’ insights and perceptions (Carillo 1990).

Awareness and inclusion means more than opening one’s doors; there is the necessity for people to represent themselves. How can we know about people different from ourselves unless we make it possible for them to speak (and us to listen)? Do we need to experience their lives to understand them or to care? International activists and organizations for cross-cultural exchanges promote understanding and empathy. The motto of the 1995 NGO Forum on Women, “Look at the World Through Women’s Eyes,” captures this necessity, as did the 30,000 women from 180 countries who traveled to Beijing because they believed in a basic commonality among women (Grandia 2001).

On a more local and temporal level, the same dynamic of mutual respect applies, for, in spite of the difficulty of working for diversity in planning an annual event, such inclusion serves as a vehicle for bringing together representation of many groups (Corman 2001). In dealing with inclusion issues, Diane Fowlkes (2001) has found that one way to work through each issue as it arrives anew, is to think of yourself as a spider, entrapping knowledge from others and remaking your web of life over and over again.

By linking the philosophical notions of individualism and privacy with the tension that ideology creates for communitarian ideals, Shane Phelan (1989) finds that adherence to rigid ideologies creates strains and limitations on people’s lives. This, then, is a warning that the failure to deal with difference leads to the loss of individuality and even the notion of community. Feminists from many different identity locations call for women to accept their differences and identify with one another to make the changes they each desire (see Bunch 1995; Davis 1995; Lorde 1984; Phelan 1989).

Maintaining both identity and community is a quest for each person to address herself or himself. After all, who is to tell someone else what her or his identity is or should be, or where individual activism should be placed? Identity does not prevent unity around issues of common concern. Nor does identity prevent activism on issues that do not affect one personally. Coalition work, joining together while maintaining separate identities, can work, has worked, and in the wave of the future, must work. No one has real community when others are shut out or their related issues are ignored (Ryan 2001). This same theme is emphasized by Adrienne Rich (1986) when she asks the next generation of women activists a simple but crucial question: [If not with others, how?]

The United Nations Conference on Women reveals the vitality and unity that can
and did occur among nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) at the Beijing Conference in 1995. This conference demonstrated that women from all over the world could share their experiences and work for change in their own countries and on a worldwide scale (Sears 1996). The same interactive spirit was shown at the 1993 Vienna Tribunal, where women from diverse countries gave similar accounts, with differing particulars, to show United Nations judges that women’s rights are human rights (Bunch 1995). Violence against women was a continuing theme that brought home the connection between kitchen fires in India and wife battering in Venezuela, clitoridectomy in Africa and anorexia in the United States. Suffrage struggles of the past show the same demand for citizenship in countries from every continent.

These stories and contributions to this book celebrate how much was accomplished in the twentieth century, even as there is still much to do. Yet, even as the current inclination is to talk of globalization, let us not forget that it is at the local level that the global has effects, and “if we do not closely understand the dynamics of the local, we fall once again into the trap of universalizing and homogenizing” (Ray 1999:166).

The readings in the last section are hopeful accounts, offering the promise of a new century in which women act together to create a better life for women of every nationality, social characteristic, and sociocultural persuasion. Their activism is for themselves, as well as for men, children, the earth, and the creatures in it—this world we all share. And, it is quite certain they will do this without compromising their sense of knowing who they are.

REFERENCES


Klein, Bonnie Sherr. 1992. "We Are Who You Are: Feminism and Disability." Ms. 3 (Nov/Dec):70–74. Also, chap. 9 in this volume.


