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## **Toward Overcoming Identity Politics – A Question of Effectiveness and Responsibility**

**Abstract:** In this paper I will examine the grounds for the desires of marginalized groups to be recognized, by building on Wendy Brown's critique of identity politics. In that context I will try to actualize the question of responsibility for the sake of critique and revision of the principles underlying identity politics. I will demonstrate how the subjects use identity politics to seek symbolic and legal recognition, by inscribing pain into the law and creating *wounded attachments*. I will show how the resistance expressed in this manner is ineffective, because the subjects: 1. are normalized and depoliticized; 2. are deprived of the possibility to take action; 3. linger in the past; 4. deny responsibility. After examining the problematic implications produced in this way, I will point out how empowering resistance can be used to overcome pain, as an alternative to identity politics.

**Keywords:** *wounded attachment*, identity politics, affirmative resistance, freedom, body, gender, responsibility, Wendy Brown

### **Feminisms and Identity Politics**

In modern times we cannot discuss feminism in singular terms, but rather as different takes on the subordinate position of women in different social contexts.<sup>1</sup> Certain feminist currents governed by identity politics through different firmly-grounded identities of *otherness* (female, gay, lesbian etc.) require space, freedom, and rights for subjects. In this way, it begins

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s the term *woman* was found to be too narrow, and feminism became the subject of strong turbulence, owing to the affirmation of diversity; questions of class, race and sexual orientation became defining to feminism in that they: 1. allow for the differences in positions of power to be understood as something more than the man/woman dichotomy; 2. multiply feminist currents; 3 shake the normative foundations. These critiques of essentializing identity happen simultaneously with the constant consolidation of different atoms of identity focal points.

from the desire to be able to understand and recognize the differences in positions of power and to have identity positions alone ensure rights – but this indirectly causes the subjects to deny responsibility and agency, thus essentially to invest in their own subordination, in a manner that I will explain further in this paper. It is important for feminisms to find ways to question the foundations they are built upon, as well as the ideas they are affirming, in order to empower those ideas through rethinking responsibility. For this purpose I refer to the critique of identity politics by Wendy Brown.

### Wendy Brown and *Wounded Attachments*

Wendy Brown claims that identity politics create *wounded attachments*. She defines them as the identities that wish to inscribe their pain – resulting from their difference compared to the ideal white, male middle class – in the law.<sup>2</sup> The identities are constituted as they explain their differences in comparison to the socially-normative ideal, represented as a strong point. Differences constituted like this become preactive grounds for identity constitution and induce the forming of *wounded attachments*. They are created by choosing, as their key starting point upon which they base their actions, the very quality that makes them marginalized in the social distribution of power.

In order to use the injury to create *wounded attachments*, identity politics invoke a shared social experience of pain and injustice. This sort of politics results from the connection between the state that awards recognitions and the marginalized groups established on the basis of the particularity of recognitions they receive.<sup>3</sup> Identity politics directly connect the subject's confession of truth about bodily injuries (in a Foucauldian manner) with legal instances and, using a disciplinary language which they criticize along the way, produce subjects as social categories.<sup>4</sup> In this way the realm of the personal constituted on the basis of gender, sex, race, and sexual identity orientation tries to politicize itself through the creation of identity, which is built on injury.

When explaining *wounded attachments*, Wendy Brown interchangeably speaks of politicization and depoliticization, not clearly distinguishing where one ends and the other begins. One who wishes to politicize their experience of pain often becomes depoliticized in their own desire. I find *wounded attachments* most often only formally politicized, but essentially depoliticized. Identity politics actually produce subject depoliticization; that is, they do not propagate the ways in which it could act independently, because they put it inside a group-minority framework. The subjects are thus limited in self-understanding of their own situation, and become less capable of contemplating the context (which is dynamic, and not static, as the identity politics depict) inside which they would be constituted as active subjects. Subjects cease

<sup>2</sup> In order to prove identity politics ineffective, Brown relies on Foucault's statement suggesting that power is where desire is, and asks what a *wounded attachment* wants. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury, Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1995, 66.

<sup>3</sup> Butler points out that identity politics are produced by "a state which can only allocate recognition and rights to subjects totalized by the particularity that constitutes their plaintiff status." Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1997, 100.

<sup>4</sup> When explaining the logic of *wounded attachments*, Brown appropriates Foucault's understanding of disciplinary power. Disciplinary power converts into individuation through gathering dissimilar knowledge about the body and normalization, but it also awards certain rights. *Wounded attachments* are at the same time normalized and consequently disciplined, which awards them certain rights, but both these processes take place through the confession of subjects' dissimilar knowledge about the pain that wounded and marginalized them.

to be constituted over their own experience in the context; rather, they take on mechanisms of group identification, a predefined position for generating understanding of their interests. This leads to divergence of the experience of injury from the subject's context, while it also leads to divergence of that experience, as represented by identity politics. As a consequence, if a subject is to invest in his/her injury, he/she stops undermining the power structures which produce the subjects into otherness. However, if a subject gives up the woundedness his/her identity is based upon it would result in self-elimination, *i.e.*, the subject would become socially invisible.

## Forming Identity Politics and the Experience of Injury

Identity politics make the experience of injury visible. To make the experience of injury visible means to show the existence of repressive mechanisms, but without showing their intrinsic logics, because capitalism is naturalized and a critique of class power abjured. Wendy Brown stresses that in this way, the subject abjures the critique of class power insofar as these identities are established vis-a-vis a "bourgeois norm of social acceptance, legal protection and relative material comfort."<sup>5</sup> There is a denial of capitalism's power effects in ordering social life, because in order to prove their injury, marginalized identities refer to the conservative identity, which represents the naturalization of capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

Identity politics are established upon their distinctiveness in deviation from conservative identity. The experience of deviation from conservative identity functions as the source of all explanation or the foundation of all knowledge, and not as something that tends to explain what produces that knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Identity politics and invoking tolerance in liberalism are similar because they depoliticize the subjects they represent. According to Brown, invoking tolerance in liberalism is using the process of depoliticization that reframes the differences as "differences of essence" rather than as differences occasioned by historical experience and specific discursive manipulations.<sup>8</sup> Just like in multiculturalism, where these differences are found between cultures and ethnic, racial, and sexual subjectivities, in identity politics they come down to an instantiated object of regret, which again circularly refers to these differences. Even though securing rights and recognition, identity politics in administrative directives regard the differences produced by social power juridically equivalent, thus neutralizing them.<sup>9</sup> In this way they subsequently deal with experience as closed, unproblematizing it,<sup>10</sup> instantiating the power of action into the intrinsic attribute of an individual, by which the subjects are decontextualized and the power of action abolished.

<sup>5</sup> Brown points out that giving a voice to politicized identities through race, gender and sexuality requires a limited identification through class, as well as that in multiculturalism the notion of class is only rarely considered and developed, even though it is formally mentioned always. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury...*, op. cit., 60.

<sup>6</sup> Wendy Brown stresses that when referring to conservative identity in order to prove one's identity, a capitalist ideal is represented as that, which will "provide good life for all". Ibid, 60.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on problematized and unproblematized experience, see: Joan Scott, "Experience", in: Judith Butler and Joan Scott (eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political*, New York, Routledge, 1992, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Brown points out that tolerance as such is not a problem, and that the call for tolerance is an attempt to perform identity production in the context of orders of stratification or marginalization. Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion- Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2006, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Wendy Brown, *States of Injury...*, op. cit., 66.

<sup>10</sup> Joan Scott, op. cit., 25-26.

## Revenge as Substitute for Responsibility

By seeking freedom in identity based on disciplinary categories, politicized identities have been deprived of a true reaction that would change the power structure, for the reason that they can only act in reaction to and revenge for unredeemed pain. Such a reaction comes from the impulse of the *wounded attachment* to inscribe in the law “its historical and present pain”,<sup>11</sup> and it could be said that in this way identity politics produce only traumatic subjects.

Brown stresses that in order for the subject to create identity from a trauma, he/she “has to reiterate the injury discursively, emotionally, as bodily and psychic trauma in the present.”<sup>12</sup> Reliving the injury on one’s own body is distressing, and this is why one might locate that repetition outside oneself - but in those with whom one closely identifies, thereby obtaining a “specter of the victimization of “one’s people”.<sup>13</sup> Brown cites the texts that invoke experiences of concrete injuries of specific individuals, by rhetorically transferring them to the general experience of certain members of target groups, which subsequently deal with this experience. This is how experiences, based on which one seeks rights, get to be appropriated and not lived, which then makes the politics of representation hypocritical. In both cases, when the injury is located outside the present time and outside oneself, the body and identity remain connected over the injury – the body as the grounds and evidence for seeking rights on account of the injury, and identity as the social recognition of injury. Through these processes of will, which return to pain, injury and impotence before the past, a space is created for the political practice of revenge, which dislocates the injury.<sup>14</sup>

Politicized identity in this manner tends to be relocated out of the present time and out of power. Relocation is rooted in the need to respond to power through morality and to prohibit the need for responsibility in the opposite direction. This is why Brown defines politicized identity as the quality of Nietzschean slave morality inundated with resentment.<sup>15</sup> Resentment itself is rooted in reaction – “the substitution of reasons, norms, and ethics for deeds”,<sup>16</sup> where the reaction is rooted in the past and installs its pain over its unredeemed history in the very foundation of its political claim, in its demand for recognition as identity.<sup>17</sup> *Wounded attachments* maintain moral superiority, which offers a beforehand given, firmly established and secured ethical position, which exempts responsibility. This position is secured by the rights and recognitions produced by the state. Of course the rights won are important, but they become a private interest which disciplinary power converts into normativized social identity.<sup>18</sup> *Wounded attachments*, as *otherness* that requires an ideal and exclusion from it, being established on rejection by the “hostile external world”,<sup>19</sup> can represent a critical function, but cannot find a way in which to change the world.

<sup>11</sup> Wendy Brown, *States of Injury...*, op. cit., 66.

<sup>12</sup> Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2001, 53.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>14</sup> Wendy Brown, *States of Injury...*, op. cit., 73.

<sup>15</sup> The feeling of guilt leads to the subject’s self-discipline, but the need for liberation from guilt also turns from self-punishment towards outside – towards revenge. As the external, which does not confirm one’s own identity, resentment reduces to evil, making the attitude towards the outside world reactive.

<sup>16</sup> Wendy Brown, *States of Injury...*, op. cit., 69.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>18</sup> Self-discipline is directed towards the desire to react through the production of social categories, over which certain rights are sought, which becomes a replacement for responsibility.

<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche in: Wendy Brown, *States of Injury...*, op. cit., 70.

## The Problem of Identity Politics and the Contemporary Vogue of Resistance

I find that action cannot be reduced to reaction that would be based upon preactive identity positions (established sex, gender, race, sexuality, etc.), but rather that in order to discuss action, it is important to consider the role of responsibility in specific situations. Over this kind of an action, marginalized subjects could find themselves a resistance that would not be underlined by resentment, i.e., by a lacking understandable only to identity politics. It is my opinion that a politics articulated in this manner could present itself as a good alternative to identity politics, which are increasingly further away from political action.

For this purpose, it will be necessary to consider a relationship between the body and freedom. When it comes to the role of the bodily experience, the problem is that identity politics find the body passive, which imposes desires that depoliticize it, i.e., by means of which the subject works on his/her depoliticization. Unproblematizing the bodily experience awakens the need for revenge, and freedom begins to be understood as complementary to domination.

Brown points out that identity politics discipline the body by interiorizing supervision through its own aspirations in the capitalist society. The body indeed is a passive form in this sense, and the resistance is meaningless, because liberal capitalist discourse colonizes minds on a daily basis, “and colonization of minds initiates, sustains or legitimates power over bodies.”<sup>20</sup> She names this resistance “contemporary vogue of resistance and the symptom of postmodernity,”<sup>21</sup> and we can come to the conclusion that such resistance is shown by identity politics as well. Identity politics seek right in relation to the body, but through its own desires that support the power structure, which makes the resistance they express a crisis of political space, and not an answer to a crisis.

Brown sees discursive power as repressive, and sees the potential for creation of productive power in restructuring subject's desires. A desire as a wish to inscribe pain in the law is the opposite to regarding freedom as practice, while a desire as wish for revenge is regarding freedom as complementarity to dominating others. Brown values Foucault's practical definition of freedom because of her critique of disciplinary language of legal instances, which facilitate social recognition of marginalized groups. She would surely concur with him in that “the liberty of men is never assured by the institutions and laws that are intended to guarantee them.”<sup>22</sup> But does not agree with him in that the subject ceases to desire freedom; rather, she feels he starts to loathe it, and that the problem is not the impossibility, but the meaninglessness of resistance.<sup>23</sup>

The freedom attempted to be won through counter-discourses does not change the relation between freedom and domination, nor does it change the relation between freedom and necessity. The result is a constant production of non-liberated individuals stemming from the individualist construction of liberalism inundated with suffering and guilt, while identity politics can only “reverse without subverting this blaming structure.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Wendy Brown, *Manhood and Politics: A Feminist Reading in Political Theory*, New Jersey, Rowman & Littlefield, 1988, 197.

<sup>21</sup> Wendy Brown, *States of Injury...*, op. cit., 49.

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, “Space, Power and Knowledge”, in: Sylvère Lotringer (ed.), *Foucault Live. Interviews, 1961–1984*, New York, Semiotext(e), 1996, 339.

<sup>23</sup> Wendy Brown, *States of Injury...*, op. cit., 64.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 70.

For this reason, identity politics represent the ineffective resistance of counter-discourse, which can only “reveal our unfreedom”<sup>25</sup> and subordinate the body, for amalgamation of the experience of pain and desire for revenge places the desire for rights and recognition into the disciplinary language. This is how the “language of recognition becomes the language of unfreedom,” which only continues the production of disciplinary categories, precluding action and allowing only reaction.

Like Hannah Arendt,<sup>26</sup> Brown feels that the freedom is contained in our capacity for action, but she stresses what Arendt fails to admit. The body is the locus or vehicle of action, hence of freedom. Brown implicitly suggests that identity politics deprive the body of freedom, and moves on to conclude that even though corporeality is a necessity, it is important to draw other possibilities from necessities, by “constructing free conditions through which to engage with them”, which is at the same time a process of individual transformation. In this manner, Brown leaves some space for tackling body and gender in political discourse. She feels that we cannot oppose body to freedom, because then need and desire become subordinated; radical democratic politics, which Brown presents as an alternative to the existing apathetic state of society, should position need and desire into the realm of creative possibilities and not of disciplinary language. She finds that the status of our needs and desires is transformed into a kind of a fluid and dynamic relationship because the “needs develop and change as we engage with another autonomous being rather than being frozen in the institutionalized form of the relationship.”<sup>27</sup>

### Action vs. Preactive Identity Based on Desire for Recognition

I find *wounded attachments* unable to empower and act because the status of the desire for recognition has remained frozen in the form of an institutionalized relationship, which reaffirms painful structures. This situation cannot be escaped from because: 1. we hold on to the disciplinary language; 2. we regard the body as a passive matter, 3. we linger in the past; 4. we renounce responsibility. These are all reasons why resistance could not be effective and affirming.

1. Brown reproaches feminist identity politics for eliminating political space, and feels that we can politically deal with questions of gender only in the field of action. The language of identity politics is actually a confession of the truth about bodily injuries to the liberal state, and it could be said that Brown advocates its staying outside the political realm, not so they could be subjugated but empowered, and requires carefully distinguishing between the “pleasures and freedoms of silence on the one hand and habituation to being silenced on the other.”<sup>28</sup> In some places she sees silence as a possibility to develop the desire for freedom, and articulation of the wide range of possibilities for a political speech that is neither confessional nor normative.

<sup>25</sup> Wendy Brown, *Manhood and Politics...*, op. cit., 197.

<sup>26</sup> Arendt makes a distinction between social and political, private and public, and finds that if the social question, the question of the body, is brought into the center of political attention, the space for political action, hence for freedom, closes.

<sup>27</sup> Wendy Brown, *Manhood and Politics...*, op. cit., 202.

<sup>28</sup> Brown affirms that the compulsion to put all into discourse can be read as a problematic remnant not only of particular histories of subordination but also of more generic anxieties of our time. Wendy Brown, *Edgework-Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2005, 96.

2. Brown suggests that we can engage with the environment and our bodies as if they were organic and sentient rather than “passive matter awaiting our imposition of form.”<sup>29</sup> This potentiality requires transformation of the body and thinking, which loses the “ideological division of our being into deterministic drives versus conscious willing.”<sup>30</sup> Critique of identity politics in Brown’s case means an end to regarding bodily injuries as training grounds for seeking justice expressed in an identity frame, and not repressing the body. When the body is regarded as marked by an injury that cannot be overcome, but needs to be avenged, it is made passive and opposed to freedom. Then, the abandonment of injury, which is the basis for identity, means self-deprivation. However, to invest in injury through politicizing and revenge means to stop undermining the power structures which produce the subject into otherness. Subjects are thus deprived of all their potential active power. In this way identity guarantees a sort of beforehand given and pre-active grounds, which activism itself cannot transform.

3. A *wounded attachment* cannot be an active one, nor can it turn towards envisioning the future, because it remains paralyzed in its desire and seeking, wounded by pain of unredeemed history. Political invention is required to move through the contours of history and establish constraints, but not norms, for political action.<sup>31</sup> Brown agrees with Hannah Arendt in that the norms most easily replace one another, and finds that political invention can question the contingent series of events and question whether truths and convictions make up the right ethos for critical political consciousness.<sup>32</sup> Identity politics is guided by norms that offer secure ethical positions. The production of new social categories becomes a replacement for responsibility.

4. Identity politics of *resentment* only replace one set of norms and positions with others that lack responsibility and empowerment. Brown sees practicing responsibility as a road to practicing freedom and asserts that freedom requires courage and invention. Responsibility is connected with seeing and envisaging a future that is based on solid norms. Unlike the contemporary vogue of resistance, affirmative resistance should pose dilemmas and responsibilities which are given in political projects and norms.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, in the fight against subordination, new norms that remain a part of the system they are fighting are not those that need to be effectively developed; rather, these should be new ideas that would change the structure of the system and not only the positions within it.

## Conclusion

I consider that the vulnerability characterizing politicized identity (based on historic marginalization) does not need to convert to injury if one would use reaction to affirm. Vulnerability is some sort of dissatisfaction, which is an internal reaction that can be embodied and become action; but according to Brown, identity politics makes reaction in itself necessarily

<sup>29</sup> Wendy Brown, *Manhood and Politics...*, op. cit., 205.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>31</sup> Brown finds that history has become weight, but feels that a genealogical approach (primarily Foucault’s) is not merely a different way of casting the historical conditions that frame contemporary practices, but a different way of casting those conditions as the stage for potential political intervention. Genealogy is a matter of political desire, political invention and political moment. Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History*, op. cit., 117–118.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>33</sup> Wendy Brown, *States of Injury...*, op. cit., 49.

something evil, since it is identified with that against which one is reacting, and that is being in this world.<sup>34</sup> This vulnerability will have the potential not to convert to a *wounded attachment*, if the desire of a politicized identity is redirected from reactivity to affirmation. Overcoming vulnerability can be empowering, if it turns to the future rather than reaffirm painful structures, if it creates new ideas instead of norms and if it changes the power structure. Brown points out that responsibility is a way not to live under power but to be empowered. Empowerment is a possible feminist approach to power, which is useful in that it breaks the common equation of power with domination, and questions not only practice, but the understanding of resistance as well.<sup>35</sup> The ineffective resistance of counter-discourse can be transformed through the perspective of desire turned to the future, to the empowering resistance, which is directed towards care and collective goals.

Identity would then be understood not as a sum of fixed interests or experience of injury, but rather as an effect of the desire oriented towards the future. The fact that the desire is oriented towards the future can be understood by another fact – that the language of “I am” changes, and is used in parallel with the language “I want this for us”.<sup>36</sup> I find that this does not make the subject renounce the identification, but that identification does not obstruct him/her in the action and contemplation on his/her own condition. In this way, action would constitute a contingent processual identity, which through its dynamic nature could recognize pain in order to overcome it. Pain and historic marginalization would then not be forgotten, the voices would not be silenced, and the subjects would be constituted by acting in the frameworks of their own power positions, which would also change these positions, and not petrify them in their marginalization.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>35</sup> Wendy Brown, *Manhood and Politics...*, op. cit., 202–207.

<sup>36</sup> Wendy Brown, *States of Injury...*, op. cit., 75.