

## boundary 2

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### **Additional Information**

## Assembling the Left

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Hard times are normal for the democratic Left. Today, however, things are more normal than usual. Feminist, gay and lesbian, and a variety of ethnic/national movements have made notable, if precarious, advances in several countries. But efforts to reduce economic inequality, protect job stability, provide viable jobs for high-school graduates, create a safety net for the down and out, curtail capitalist adventurism, and protect the environment have fallen on hard times. Various explanations can be cited for this condition: the stain placed on the Left by the economic failure and authoritarianism of communist regimes, even though the democratic Left was very critical of these conditions; the return to naïve faith in the market by many who are cynical about the capacities of the state; the globalization of contingency (as in climatic warming, storm systems, civil wars, financial contagion, and market imperatives), which makes it even more difficult to get a state to address general welfare within its borders; the rise of religious and national fundamentalisms; the identity disturbance felt by many white working-class men as they engage new social movements by gays, feminists, **[End Page 47]** and people of color; the recurrent scandals and national trials (think of the Menendez brothers, the Bobbitts, Pamela Smart, O. J. Simpson, Princess Di, the Clinton Show, and JonBenet Ramsey) that monopolize media time, diverting it from issues with a longer time horizon; and the retreat in the academy toward a conservative brand of liberalism that welcomes most heartily a narrow band of perspectives on the cultural economy and the economic culture. My sense is that each of these elements kindles the others. A contagion-effect circulates through the complex, giving the assemblage more clout than any element would have alone.

I focus here on the academy. The academy is crucial because it has served as an important relay point in many vibrant social movements of the last few decades, including the war on poverty and the civil rights, antiwar, disarmament, divestment in South Africa, feminist, gay rights, and ecology movements. When the academic Left is active, it enters into a series of connections with critical branches of the media, street activists, adventurous elements in organized labor, and creative religious institutions. Today, however, the academic Left is divided against itself, and it is generally held in low regard by those few in the media who identify with progressive politics. Some contend that the academic Left must strive to restore internal solidarity so it can secure a more solid foothold from which to reach out to other critical forces. This does not seem like the most promising approach to me. Indeed, I think the reflexlike demand to attain solidarity on the Left exacerbates differences within it and accelerates defections from it. A better strategy is to promote agonistic respect between various components of the Left so that those ugly struggles to monopolize left enclaves, ghettos, and caves in the academy can be attenuated. Each orientation on the Left, in my fantasy world, would articulate comparatively its political focus and priorities, as well as its theoretical and metaphysical perspectives. These differences, and the numerous relays between them, would be contested actively in a variety of forums. The contending parties might move each other in one way or another. But amid the swirl of these differences, they would also enter into selective coalitions on specific political issues. The demand for left solidarity would melt away as more constituencies understood that—given the great diversity of *experiences* out of which a critical temper is honed and the corollary multiplication of *sites* of political action that mark the late-modern time—the demand for solidarity itself breaks down the plurality of the Left into a set of warring factions. The specter haunting the Left today is an unattractive set of internal struggles for hegemony in **[End Page 48]** which each party calls the other names that give ammunition to the cultural Right. I will not rehearse the names.

To nudge the campaign of diversification forward, consider the possible relation between a critical theorist such as Nancy Fraser and, well, a rhizomatic pluralist such as me.<sup>1</sup> Fraser knows people like me, especially those on the deconstructive side of the feminist Left. She defines us, even as she seeks to incorporate us into her larger vision. Our faction, as she sees it, concentrates on the “politics of recognition,” while another faction focuses on the “politics of distribution.” As the former seeks to expand diversity in gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and irreligion by deconstructing the experiences of naturalness and universality in mainstream identities, it often gets bogged down in ontological and epistemological issues. The latter focuses on general issues of income distribution and dignity in work, but it often disparages the politics of recognition in doing so. Each faction ignores the priorities of the other, and yet the two perspectives need to be brought into harmony. As Fraser seeks to do.

Since I, too, connect (what I call) the “politics of becoming” to questions of income distribution, one might think that Fraser and I would stand together. But, predictably, the more I read Fraser, the more I learn how much I disagree with her, even as I contend that an

ethos of diversification and the reduction of inequality set conditions of possibility for each other.<sup>2</sup> Rather than reducing the number of factions, Fraser and I add to them. **[End Page 49]**

Fraser makes an “analytical” distinction between distribution and recognition. She concedes that these two dimensions become “entwined” in practice.<sup>3</sup> But it is the heuristic value of the distinction itself that is problematic to me. Consider a few statements:

The first is socioeconomic injustice, which is rooted in the political-economic structure of society.

(13)

The second understanding of injustice is cultural or symbolic. Here injustice is rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication.

(14)

The remedy for economic injustice is political-economic restructuring of some sort. . . . The remedy for cultural injustice, in contrast, is some sort of cultural or symbolic change.

(15)

I shall leave to one side questions such as, do redistribution and recognition constitute two distinct, irreducible, *sui generis* concepts of justice, or alternatively, can either one of them be reduced to the other? Rather, I shall assume that however we account for it metatheoretically, it will be useful to maintain a working, first-order distinction between socioeconomic injustices and their remedies, on the one hand, and cultural injustices and their remedies, on the other.

(16)

Instead of simply endorsing or rejecting all of identity politics *simpliciter*, we should see ourselves as presented with a new . . . task: that of developing a *critical* theory of recognition . . . that . . . defends only those versions of the cultural politics of difference that can be coherently combined with the social politics of equality.

(12)

Fraser goes on to say that gay and lesbian issues conform best to the model of cultural politics, and class to that of distributive politics, **[End Page 50]** whereas race and gender fall in between as “bivalent” (19) modes. But I find her exploration of gender politics to be richer than her readings of the two types said to best fit her distinctions. What is for her a bivalence in gender that cuts across the analytical model is for me a condition that reveals the deficiency of the model. To Fraser, one line of correspondence is marked by

“socioeconomic injustice,” “political-economic structure,” and “redistribution,” while the other is constituted by “representation, interpretation, and communication,” and “cultural or symbolic change.” But no politics anywhere seems to me to fit this division as she characterizes it.

Such a division, first, understates the role that the politics of interpretation plays on the distributive side. Mobilization of energies for the reduction of income inequality, for instance, involves a whole series of changes in patterns of self-interpretation now deeply entrenched in the culture: the state as the primary site of ineptness and source of dislocations in the corporate economy; the market as a vehicle of rationality and freedom that must not be tampered with to promote redistribution; the primacy of individual responsibility for unemployment and welfare dependence; the displacement of Keynesianism by Friedmanite manipulation of the monetary system; and so on. To reduce economic inequality not only requires macropolitical action at the level of the state and interstate system; such macropolitical action requires extensive seeding and support by micropolitical engagements on a number of fronts. As one acknowledges how significantly cultural self-interpretation helps to constitute macro-institutional practices and priorities, one, first, restrains the tendency to place macropolitics on the side of distribution and micropolitics on the side of recognition, and, second, sets the stage to scramble further the analytical divide Fraser constructs between distribution and recognition.

On the recognition side of Fraser’s scheme, the reduction of recognition to the symbolic underplays both the dense materiality of culture and its constitutive role in institutional life. Even to learn a language, for instance, is to inscribe its forms into the fine muscles of your jaw, mouth, lips, and tongue. The accents we display when we speak a second language convey this incorporation of culture into our organs of hearing and muscles of articulation. Fraser, it turns out, is not materialist enough for me. Moreover, a sensual orientation—orthodox or heterodox—is located not merely in a symbolic dimension but in complex relays between the symbolic and specific corporealizations of thought-imbued feelings of attraction, disgust, indifference, aversion, and identification. Not only “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” but multiple differences in attraction to muscular or **[End Page 51]** slender types, blondes or brunettes, humorous or ironic individuals are incorporated. No ethnic, religious, sexual, or gender identity would *be* without a complex of corporeal orientations, even though none is reducible to a set of stereotyped gestures. But that means that a softening of relations between antagonistic constituencies of difference often involves complex work on the visceral register of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. That is why Foucauldian arts of the self and Deleuzian micropolitics are so pertinent to politics: Politics often involves work on the complex cultural relays between argument, images, intensities, and feelings. Deliberative democracy, as it were, is relevant but insufficient to materialization of an egalitarian ethos of pluralism.

Finally, Fraser’s “pure” example of the politics of recognition—gay and lesbian politics—is intimately bound up with corporate, family, military, academic, and state institutions. To

“recognize” same-sex marriage, for instance, would be to change innumerable laws, habits, and customs about who gets married, the terms of medical coverage, eligible life insurance beneficiaries, the types of affiliation exemplified in novels and films, street displays of affection, laws of inheritance, and so on. Any significant change in relations between constituencies involves a series of changes in institutional practice and corporeal orientation.

So by the time Fraser is ready to unfold a middle position that “reconciles” the critical theory of Seyla Benhabib with the deconstructive perspective of Judith Butler, I have already jumped the ship of reconciliation. I see no reason for Butler to accept analytical distinctions inadvertently devaluing priorities that grip her profoundly. And while I feel confident that I would dissent from the metaphysics of Benhabib, I think she is wise to keep reflection alive on that register. For this is a persistent area of contestation within the Left. It seems unlikely to me, then, that Fraser, Butler, Benhabib, and I will ever achieve harmony. Nonetheless, while I oppose Fraser’s depreciation of micropolitics and arts of the self, while I find these modes to be very pertinent to a culture of pluralization and economic egalitarianization, I still imagine I would be aligned with some of Fraser’s macropolitical strategies of income distribution if we could get them on the radar screen of public engagement. It also seems likely to me that I will coalesce with Benhabib and Butler on numerous occasions as well. At some point in time, all four of us may join the same coalition, even though we will draw on different sources of ethics and strategic priorities in doing so. You might even glimpse a small, rhizomatic assemblage forming around these four nodal points, without a definitive center at which all the parties converge. **[End Page 52]**

My conviction is that the materialization of a generous ethos of multidimensional pluralism—an ethos itself drawn from several ethical sources—also sets a key condition of possibility for the reduction of economic inequality.<sup>4</sup> And vice versa.<sup>5</sup> The potential for synergy on the Left, then, may reside in the production of multiple relays between constituencies who locate their priorities differently, more than in the formation of a single block in which members agree on what priorities all must adopt with respect to both. Indirect evidence for this thesis can be found on right-wing TV talk shows. Every time it appears possible to generalize medical care, increase welfare, or improve urban education, the Right campaigns against these changes by blaming the poor for their condition and by showing how homosexuals, AIDS victims, unwed mothers, drug addicts, or nihilists might benefit from the proposed policies. That strategy of division would not succeed if a generous ethos of pluralism were materialized. So the ethos sets a condition of possibility for a reduction of inequality in income and job security. I have no doubt that many on the democratic Left disagree with my convictions on this score. But it still seems probable that many of us can find specific occasions to band together across these differences. **[End Page 53]**

The academic Left will continue to debate metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and

strategic issues even as its participants, hopefully, soften the intensity of these debates and seek points of connection across them. A preliminary objective might be to outgrow the exclusionary politics that haunts journals and academic enclaves on the Left by letting go of the fantasy of defining a hegemonic position to which all true leftists must subscribe. The need today is, rather, construction of a series of alliances across multiple lines of difference in assumption, priority, ethical source, and modes of politics. As we establish relations of agonistic respect across differences, we can also hope to strengthen our hand in the academy and improve communications with sympathetic parties in the media, churches, street movements, and labor groups.

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### Footnotes

**1.** “A rhizome as subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicles. Bulbs and tubers are rhizomes. . . . A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles. A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural and cognitive” (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987], 6–7).

**2.** It would be an exaggeration to say that those involved in the “politics of recognition” ignore the “politics of distribution.” Such a claim, for instance, misses the work of Wendy Brown in *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), and of others, as well. In *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), I explore an ethos of engagement between multiple constituencies that would promote opportunities for both critical responsiveness to new identities and collective assemblages to reduce employment instability and income inequality. Chapter 3 of this work, “Democracy, Equality, Normality,” explores how “a culture of economic equality, appropriately maintained, is compatible with a cultural world crossed by multifarious lines of ethnicity, religion, irreligion, sexuality, ‘race,’ gender performance, household organization, and so on” (94). This chapter explores how inclusive patterns of consumption in health care, transportation, insurance, and so on can make it easier for households to make ends meet as it also opens up possibilities for rapprochement between the white working class and several carriers of cultural pluralization.

**3.** Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections of the “Postsocialist” Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 12. Hereafter, quotations from this work are cited parenthetically by page number only.

**4.** This is another area of disagreement between Fraser and me, as has already become clear. When she criticizes “postmodernism” for its lack of a moral theory, her positive citations imply that there is a neo-Kantian model drawn selectively from Kant, Rawls, and Habermas to which all of us can refer. It seems to me, however, that this is a domain in which contestation remains vociferous, partly because no proponent of the neo-Kantian tradition has ever sealed up the theory as tightly as needed to command universal acceptance by all reasonable people. (Rawls has more or less

conceded this point.) I support, through selective indebtedness to Epicurus, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Deleuze, an ethic in which you cultivate care for the abundance of life over identity and draw on the effects of that work to fold a modicum of generosity and forbearance into the collective faiths, identities, interests, and conceptions of justice that inhabit you. Critical responsiveness to the politics of becoming is not entirely reducible to the practice of justice—even in those instances in which people concur on the criteria of justice—because before a new identity crosses the threshold of consolidation, it is not yet on the register of justice. The key to the politics of becoming is the struggle to get on the register. The paradoxical relation of interdependence and strife between justice and critical responsiveness is explored in chapter 2 of *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). Of course, I agree that my fundamental orientation is contestable, as is every other ethical source drawn on in the monotheistic and secular traditions. This is why the ethos of deep pluralism involves forbearance in negotiations between parties drawing on a variety of moral sources.

**5.** The political paradox, as discussed elsewhere, is that if each sets a condition of possibility for the other, it becomes very difficult to find the leverage needed to work effectively on either until the other is installed.

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