

Social Construction and the Transformation of Identity Politics

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Social construction and identity politics form a pair of star-crossed lovers, entwined in a relationship suffused with passion, provocation and perfidy. No easy relationship this, but one in which deep intimacy has given birth to an enormously influential array of movements across the land. As I presently see it, however, the fecundity of this union is rapidly diminishing. The tensions between these otherwise intimates has burst into bitterness. Their love-children now enter very mean streets - with damaging counter-critique, derision, disregard, and disaffection on every darkened corner. And with identity politics under siege, social constructionism now seems a suspicious ally - if not indeed an assassin. Can identity politics sustain its course successfully, and should its relationship with social construction be maintained? In what follows I shall propose that identity politics cannot continue successfully in its existing modes of action, and that indeed, we find a movement struggling toward reformation. Similarly, constructionist dialogues are entering a new phase of development. The new turn in constructionist endeavors can and should play a key role in the future evolution of identity politics. We are poised then, for a rekindling of the passions, in what I will call a relational politics.

Although the phrase "identity politics" has served many different purposes, for the present I will take it to stand for a mode of political activism - typically though not exclusively initiated by groups excluded from traditional main-stream politics. Such marginalized groups generate a self-designated identity (group consciousness) that is instantiated by the individual identities of its constituents. Identity politics differs from many social movements, such as left-wing or fundamentalist Christian activism, in that the constituents of the former - such as women, Afro-Americans, gays - are politically marked as individuals. Politics and personal being are virtually inseparable. This inseparability is owing largely to the natural production of the political categories. One may by virtue of reason or impulse join the National Rifle Association or the Praise the Lord Club. Not so with being a native American or a black Muslim. One simply is, by virtue of nature or thrown condition, an Asian American, a lesbian, or a member of the lower class. And finally, it is largely by virtue of the "natural" condition of its members, that the groups lay claim to certain inalienable rights - for example, equal opportunities, equal treatment, freedom to practice, participation in democratic governance.

Turning to social constructionism, perhaps the preceding discussions of the day are sufficiently descriptive. However, again for immediate purposes, I will take constructionism to represent a range of dialogues centered on the social genesis of what we take to be knowledge, reason, and virtue on the one side, and the enormous

range of social practices born and/or sustained by these discourses on the other. In its critical moment, social constructionism is a means of bracketing or suspending any pronouncement of the real, the reasonable, or the right. In its generative moment, constructionism offers an orientation toward creating new futures, an impetus to societal transformation.

Why a love affair between identity politics and social constructionism? There are many reasons. Among them, the generalized shift toward social construction in the academy furnished a powerful justificatory basis for political and moral activism. For the better part of the century, the academy basked in what it believed to be an ideological non-partisanship (see, for example, Bell's *The End of Ideology*). Epitomized by the positivist-empiricist stance in the natural and social sciences, it was held that the function of inquiry is to determine what is objectively true. Moral and ideological commitment obfuscate the quest, as it was said, yielding bias and misinformation. ("Proper scholarship is about truth, not the good.") However, as constructionist critique challenged claims to objectivity - truth beyond cultural standpoint - so did it eradicate the is-ought divide. Not only did the discourses of truth, objectivity, and rationality cease to be commanding rhetorics, but their claimants seemed guilty of either ignorance (lack of reflection on implicit ideology) or exploitation (masking self-serving ideology in the cloak of neutrality). The constructionist assault, then, led to a slow deterioration of authority, with the simultaneous liberation of politically and morally invested inquiry. If one's professional work is inevitably political, as constructionists reason, then the academician is furnished a new and inspiring telos. Rather than generating knowledge that may or may not be used by those making decisions for the society - as the pure scientists envisioned their goal - the knowledge generating process becomes itself a means of creating the good society. (Women's Studies, Black Studies, and Queer Studies are exemplary of this impulse.)

Not only did constructionism thus help to incite the political impulse, but it has also generated a powerful set of implements for societal critique. Constructionist inquiry demonstrated how claims to the true and the good were born of historical traditions, fortified by social networks, sewn together by literary tropes, legitimated through rhetorical devices, and operated in the service of particular ideologies to fashion structures of power and privilege. For the sophisticated constructionist, there are no invulnerable or unassailable positions, no foundational warrants, no transcendent rationalities, or obdurate facts in themselves. Most important for the present, many of these modes of deconstructing the opposition are "street ready;" they can be (and are) paraphrased easily in the daily argots of political activism.

The Unraveling of Identity Politics

You will not be mistaken if you recognize in these remarks a soupcon of nostalgia. These have been times of dizzying excitement, crashing idols, scintillating discussion, and epiphanies of virtue. No, I scarcely think the implications are yet fully explored nor their action potential exhausted. However, in my view the

enormous force of identity politics, aided and abetted as it has been by constructionist dialogues, has begun to subside. In large measure, this deterioration of efficacy can be understood in terms of cultural change, change which can in part be traced to the influence of identity politics itself. To take a constructionist stance in this analysis, let me focus only on the rhetoric of identity politics.

At the outset, the prevailing rhetoric has been of little influence outside groups of the already committed. For the targets - those most in need of "political education" - such rhetoric has more often been alienating or counter-productive. By and large identity politics has depended on a rhetoric of blame, the illocutionary effects of which are designed to chastise the target (for being unjust, prejudiced, inhumane, selfish, oppressive, and/or violent). In western culture we essentially inherit two conversational responses to such forms of chastisement - incorporation or antagonism. The incorporative mode ("Yes, now I see the error of my ways.") requires an extended forestructure of understandings (i.e. a history which legitimates the critic's authority and judgment, and which renders the target of critique answerable). However, because in the case of identity politics, there is no pre-established context to situate the target in just these ways, the invited response to critique is more typically one of hostility, defense and counter-charge.

Such antagonistic replies are additionally invited by virtue of the differing discourse worlds of the critic as opposed to target. What are viewed as "exploitative wages" on the one side are branded as "just earnings" on the other; "prejudicial decisions" on the one side are excoriated as "decisions by merit" on the other; attempts to combat "exclusionary prejudices" are seen as disruptions of "orderly and friendly community;" "rigid parochialism" for the critic is understood as "love of enduring traditions" by the target. Under such conditions those targeted by the critiques are least likely to take heed, and most likely to become galvanized in opposition. As Mary Ann Glendon argues in *Rights Talk*, the rhetoric of rights "polarizes debate; it tends to suppress moral discussion and consensus building. Once an agenda is introduced as 'right,' sensible discussion and moderate positions tend to disappear."

It should be added that this antagonistic animus is not limited to the relationship of critic to target, but rather, has carried over significantly into many of the political movements themselves. With the rhetoric of blame a favored option for dealing with others, it also becomes a hammer for fixing what is wrong within the political movements. Any movement which finds its voice oppressed within the culture more generally, will soon find that within its own ranks some voices are more equal than others. In the thrust toward economic equality, women turn on men for their patriarchal disposition; in the drive toward gender equality, white women are found guilty of silencing the black voice, the educationally privileged guilty of elitist and exclusionary language, the straight for politics inimical to the lesbian, and so on. To illustrate, prominent black intellectual Patricia Hill Collins (1990) writes of the necessity for a specifically black feminist movement. However, she also advocates a "critical posture toward mainstream, feminist, and Black scholarly inquiry" more generally. (p.12). Here she joins other prominent black thinkers, along with a cadre of

Hispanic, Native American and Asian-American women in challenging feminism for its implicit racism and its overarching concern with white, middle-class women's issues. Not only is the dominant rhetoric of identity politics divisive in its effects, there are important respects in which it has lost its efficacy by virtue of its profusion. The rhetorics of rights, for example, has traveled weightlessly across contexts of contention. Where the most celebrated battles for equality were fought within the domains of class, race and gender, the forms of rhetoric have become available to all who suffer. Rapidly the big three were joined by native Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics, the aged, the homeless, ex-mental patients, the disabled, gay and lesbian enclaves, along with advocates for the rights to life, and children's rights. We also find litigation based on claims to a right to higher education, death row inmates to reproduce, and women's rights to urinate in any public facility. As Amitai Etzioni (1993) proposes, "The incessant issuance of new rights, like the wholesale printing of currency, causes a massive inflation of rights that devalues their moral claims." Glendon (1991) adds that rights talk contains the "unexpressed premise that we roam at large in a land of strangers, where we presumptively have no obligations toward others except to avoid the active infliction of harm." Other critics are far more scathing. National columnists have even spoken of "the rights babble,"

Finally, given its relatively longstanding presence in cultural life, there has been ample time for the development of effective counter-rhetorics. As Hirschman (1991) points in *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, discursive attempts to thwart social change have a rich history. However, the past several decades have stimulated a new range of self-insulating rebuttals. There is, for example, the redoubt of "victimization" - which proposes that claims to being a victim of oppressive circumstances are merely excuses to cover failures of inaction or irresponsibility. Reactionary critic, Charles Sykes (1992) proposes that we have become a "nation of victims," and that the rhetoric of rights and blame is responsible for a "decay in the American character." In his volume, *The Abuse Excuse*, Alan Dershowitz claims that we have become a nation of "sob stories." One of the most powerful rebutting rhetorics, owing to the fact that it has been appropriated from identity politics itself, is that of political correctness. So trenchant are the minorities' critiques of established policies and practices that, for the target, they take on a tyrannical demeanor - thus violating their rights to tradition and voice. As one commentator recently noted, it may be one of the first times in the nation's history in which both sides of political debate lodge their defense in civil liberties. Finally, as anti-liberalist critics such as Michael Sandel (1982) have begun to dismantle the justification of individual rights, the way has been paved for a rhetoric of responsibility to replace that of rights. It is this latter rhetoric that has enabled the Communitarian movement to gain such high cultural visibility.

And if these repercussions of rhetoric are not sufficiently daunting, identity politics also appears to produce strong resentment among many who are implicated in the movements (for example, African and Asian Americans), but who do not share the revolutionary political sentiments and are embarrassed by the ways in which they are incessantly singled out to represent "their people." This disaffiliation within is also

paralleled by backlash effects in the society more generally (consider the present Congress). And finally, how much enthusiasm are appeals to justice, rights, or equality likely to stimulate among the apathetic aimless ranks of Generation X?

The Fissures Within

If identity politics were not sufficiently embattled by the vicissitudes of cultural history, it has also begun to feel a certain suffocating presence from its constructionist paramour. For, while social constructionism supplies vibrant discursive resources for building internal strength and undermining the opposition, it also plays havoc with central tenets of identity politics. In particular, constructionism offers strong arguments against the realism, essentialism, and ethical foundationalism endemic to much of the discourse of identity politics.

In the first instance, the social critiques developed within identity politics are typically lodged within a realist discourse, a discourse which privileges its critique with the capacity for truth beyond perspective. In characterizing the barriers of class, the glass ceiling, homo-phobia, the effects of pornography on rape, and the embryonic fetus as a human being, for example, claims are being about the state of nature independent of our interpretive proclivities. For the constructionist, of course, the such claims are not so much reflections of nature as the outcome of social process. The descriptions are inherently positioned both historically and culturally, and myriad alternatives are both possible and creditable from other societal locations. The realist posture is all the more ironic, the constructionist reasons, because such critiques are often coupled with a deconstruction of the opposition's objectivity. The constructed character of the dominant discourse is used by the identity politician to pave the way for the marginalized alternative, with the latter position then treated as if transparent.

Closely related to a problematic realism is the essentialist presumption implicit in much identity politics. To make claims for the rights of women, children, the aged, the poor, the insane, and so on typically implies the existence of an essential entity - a group unified by its distinctive features. The group name is treated as referential - derived from characteristics existing in nature, independent of the name itself. For the constructionist, of course, reference is preeminently a social achievement and thus inherently defeasible. The reality of history, ethnicity, class, and so on is generated within contemporary cultural life, and could be otherwise. As Henry Louis Gates (1994) proposes, blackness is "not a material object, an absolute, or an event," but only "a trope." And lodging the argument in social process, he goes on, "Race is only a sociopolitical category, nothing more." As this sociopolitical category is applied to individuals it also acts as a reductive agent, circumscribing one's identity, and reducing one's potential to be otherwise. In his *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby*, Stephen Carter proposes that such labels operate as problematic stereotypes, covering over complexities and generating misleading social policies. (See also Calhoun, 1994)

Finally, constructionist thought also militates against the claims to ethical foundations implicit in much identity politics - that higher ground from which others can so confidently be condemned as inhumane, self-serving, prejudiced, and unjust. Constructionist thought painfully reminds us that we have no transcendent rationale upon which to rest such accusations, and that our sense of moral indignation is itself a product of historically and culturally situated traditions. And the constructionist intones, is it not possible that those we excoriate are but living also within traditions that are, for them, suffused with a sense of ethical primacy? As we find, then, social constructionism is a two edged sword in the political arena, potentially as damaging to the wielding hand as to the opposition.

The Relational Turn in Social Construction

Has the time arrived for our flagging and tempestuous lovers to part company? Should identity politics now be abandoned, as but one more ultimately ineffectual means of securing voice, dignity and economic stakes for those perennially trammled by classes whose resources permit the pretense of self-sufficiency? There are many who now consider this a serious possibility. And should social constructionism now content itself with a more sedentary scholarly role, circulating filigreed obscurities among its own kind - culture critique without audience, commentary without commitment? Perhaps my answer is already supplied by the phrasing of these questions. I have cherished the gains achieved by identity politics, and grieve at its failings; and for me, if constructionism ceases to be politically engaged it will lose its essential elan. More positively, however, I see significant signs of transformation in both identity politics and in social constructionism. In the political arena, for example, left-wing activist Todd Gitlin (1993) despairs of what has become of identity politics, the proliferation of which, he says, "leads to a turning inward, a grim and hermetic bravado celebrating victimization and stylized marginality." (p.173) Black intellectuals, Cornel West, Toni Morrison, and Henry Louis Gates, have also turned critical toward the past political postures, and now resonate with many others seeking an evolution in identity politics. Let me, then, describe what I feel to be central changes taking place in constructionist thought. We may then consider how these changes lend themselves to a resparked romance and a re-visioned political agenda.

Since their emergence as a self-conscious force (most prominently in the 1970s) social constructionist writings have largely been deconstructive in their aims and effects. By demonstrating the social, linguistic, rhetorical, ideological, cultural, and historical forces responsible for generating the world of knowledge - both professional and everyday - they have challenged all claims to authority, truth, rationality, and moral superiority. In effect, they have been highly effective forces for extending rights for negotiating the real and the good. And, while this enterprise must and should continue, alone it is insufficient. It is insufficient in part because its primary role is symbiotic; it remains dormant until the fools begin to dance. At the same time, as constructionist discourse is placed into orbit, as it begins to insinuate itself into the ways we describe and explain, so does it invite new forms of action -

new patterns of relationship. In certain respects, these patterns represent dislocating alternatives to traditions of centuries duration. In effect, constructionism harbors enormous implicative potential for our cultural forms of life. In the exploration of this potential, constructionist inquiry moves from a symbiotic to a productive posture - from deconstruction to reconstruction.

I could speak at length about work within this proactive register - about the ways in which constructionist thought now contributes to dialogues on a new agenda for the human sciences, innovations in research methodology, the technology and society interface, the reconceptualization of power, the rekindling of spirituality, and the potentials of relativism. I am also very keen to talk about the ways in which constructionist ideas have been cashed out in a new array of practices, for example, in education, therapy, conflict resolution, organizational development, and business ethics.

However, given time and topic I shall focus on only one implicative arena, namely that of relational theory and practice. To appreciate the blossoming of relational theory, consider a longstanding intellectual problem the significance of which is matched only by its resistance to solution: how is interpersonal understanding achieved - how do we comprehend others' meanings (or fail to do so)? Since the 17th century virtually all attempts at answering have been cast in terms of resonating mentalities. That is, to understand another requires that their thoughts (intentions, meanings, construals, conceptual worlds) are reproduced in some form within one's own thinking. If you understand me your subjectivity is in some way resonant with my own. From John Locke, through centuries of hermeneutic theory, and into contemporary cognitive theory, however, no one has been able to give a satisfactory account of how such resonances can occur (see, for example, Taylor, 1992).

In its deconstructive phase, social constructionism brought with it only increased skepticism. Reader response theorists and Stanley Fish's (1980) work on interpretive communities argued, for one, that it is the reader (or listener) who determines the meaning of the author or actor's words; semiological theory - whether elaborated by Barthes or Derrida - raised doubts concerning the very idea of an authorial impulse lying behind the words. And, social theorists demonstrated that the mind itself is a social construction. Therefore, anything that is said about the nature of subjectivity (whether my own or that of another) has no natural object, no referent in fact, but is the mythical byproduct of social interchange.

The result of such overwhelming skepticism leaves us either in the awkward position of denying the very possibility that understanding occurs, or more promisingly, of proceeding on other premises. It is on this latter avenue that theorists such as myself, John Shotter, Barnett Pierce, Vern Cronen, and others have been traveling for a time. For me, in any case, the challenge has been to generate an account of understanding (and misunderstanding) that makes no reference to mental events (intentions, meanings, subjectivities, etc.) whatsoever. By focusing solely on the means by which an individual's actions invite or suggest a range of supplements, and the way in which

the respondent's supplements function to determine the implication of the initial action, we arrive at a view of meaning as embedded within relational scenarios (Gergen, 1994). I do not convey meaning, save through your graces as an interlocutor; however, your potential meaning as an interlocutor are largely constituted by my actions. As dialogue unfolds, so is meaning formed and transformed within the interstice.

On this view, language (as a vehicle for making meaning) is shaped neither by nature nor mind, but by relationship. All that we take to be true of nature and of mind, of self and others, thus finds its origins within relationship. Or, in Martin Buber's terms, "In the beginning is the relationship."

Toward Relational Politics

If we press out the implications of social constructionist thought in just these ways - with relational process thus foregrounded - what are the implications for identity politics? In my view the potentials are substantial. Indeed, I believe that we find here the seeds for both revitalization and transformation of the most profound variety. Let me cast such a transformation in terms relational politics - a politics in which neither self nor other, we nor them, take precedence, but in which relational process serves as the generative source of change. I am not speaking here of a mere fantasy, another grand but unworkable design hatched in the ivory tower. Rather, I believe that relational politics are already in evidence - not yet self-conscious, but struggling in multiple sites toward common intelligibility. In order to elaborate the implications of a relational politics, I focus on three specific sites of development: the re-visioning of self and other, rhetorical practice, and social action.

Re-Theorizing Self and Other

In important degree, identity politics is a descendent of western, individualist ideology. No, it is not the single individual who commands our interest. Rather, as we have seen, individual identity is conflated with group identity: individual and group interests (and rights) are one. In this way, the group replaces the individual as the center of concern, but the discourse of individuality is not thereby disrupted. Rather, the group is treated in much the same way discursively as the individual: imbued with good and evil intent, held blameworthy, deemed worthy of rights, and so on. In spite of the shift toward the social, we thus inherit the problems of individualism yet once again - simply one step removed. Rather than a society of isolated and alienated individuals - a potential war of all against all in the individualist sense - we have a battlefield of antagonistic groups. As James Hunter's (1991) puts it, we are now engaged in "culture wars."

Advocates of identity politics are now becoming keenly aware of the problematics of separation. As they point out, the dominant culture is already prone toward objectification of the Other. In du Preez' (1980) terms, the other is forced into identity traps that confirm the dominant culture's sense of superiority and self-righteousness.

It is in this light that we can understand the attempt by black intellectuals to blur the distinction between self and other. For example, in his volume, *Race Matters*, Cornel West warns against the delineation of a distinct black culture, and seeks a "frank acknowledgment of the basic humanness and Americanness of each of us." Similarly, Stanley Crouch in *Notes of a Hanging Judge*, argues that politics must involve African-Americans "not as outsiders" - a distinct group unto itself - but as participants in broad-ranging enclaves of society, for example as "voters, taxpayers, and sober thinkers." In a similar vein, Todd Gitlin (1993) speaks of commonality politics, oriented around understanding differences "against the background of what is not different, what is shared among groups."(p.173)

These are salutary invitations to subverting the traditional binary, and reconceptualizing self and other. Given the constructionist shift toward a relational sensibility, I believe we are poised for just such a revisioning. We confront the possibility of developing intelligibilities that go beyond the identification of separable units - I vs. you, we vs. them - and that may create reality of relatedness, the palpability of inseparability. How might a relational intelligibility be articulated? There are several current attempts to achieve this end, each of which contributes significantly and differentially to a relational consciousness. There is, for example, a bustling renaissance of interest in Vygotsky's (1978) inquiries into cognitive development (see for example, Wertsch, 1991). The significance of this work is largely owing to its dislodgment of psychology's longstanding investment in autonomous, or self-contained cognitive processes, and its replacement by a profoundly more socialized conception of self. For the Vygotskian, to paraphrase John Locke, there is nothing in thought that is not first in society. Or, to extend the implications, the concept of the autonomous agent is a myth; each of us is constituted by the other; we cannot deliberate or decide without implicate otherness. While Vygotskians do retain a strong interest in individual functioning, more fully relational is a range of work conceptualizing the self as dialogically constituted (see, for example, Shotter, 1993; Sampson, 1993a; Hermans and Kempen, 1993). In this case, drawing significantly from Bakhtinian semiotics, the individual is conceptualized as inseparable from ongoing social process (with the conversation featured as the dominant metaphor). Within this frame individual psychological process is typically granted ontological status, but similar to the Vygotskians, only as a private stand-in for public conversation.

My own endeavors, perhaps constituting a radical relationalism, have followed a third route (see Gergen, 1994). My attempt has been to make intelligible a range of micro-social scenarios, or relational forms in which individual action derives its sense or meaning from its placement within the extended interchange. Thus, for example, an expression of anger is nonsense if isolated from a scenario of relationship. One cannot sensibly be angry without a preceding action that grants anger meaning as a supplement. And, once anger is expressed, there are only a limited number of meaningful moves available to the target (e.g. apology, explanation, hostility). If apology is the subsequent move in the dance, there are only a limited number of options then rendered plausible as replies. In effect, actions such

as anger and apology gain their meaning from the broader relational scenario in which they are embedded. Individual bodies may bear the signifiers into action, but the moves (anger, apology, etc.) are not thereby possessions of individuals. They are constituents of the relational dance.

These various efforts toward relational intelligibility have substantial implications for the future deliberation of identity politics. To briefly scan the horizons, they argue, for example, that:

- There is no natural (biological, genetic) basis for inter-group antagonism (as socio-biologists, ethologists, and Freudians, are wont to argue). Violence is a meaningful integer in a relational dance; this dance is rooted in historical convention, and is subject to change both on the grass-roots and policy levels.
- There are no prejudiced individuals. Prejudicial action is a meaningful move within a variety of cultural scenarios. As the scenarios unfold, so is prejudicial action invited. Given a modicum of participation in the culture (including its mass media) all of us are capable of such actions. By the same token, we are all capable of loving, caring and societally responsible action. All actions, in effect, are byproducts of existing relational forms.
- Identity - whether individual or group - is not derived from the nature of the world. (There are no necessary or natural distinctions among persons or groups). Rather, identity is a relational achievement. Individuation is only one of many ways in which we might describe or explain the world. And such forms of discourse obscure the more essential domain of connection.
- There is no means of winning, if winning means loss for the other. To condemn, excoriate, or wage war against a constructed other in our society is inherently self-destructive; for we are the other. They are born of us, emulate us, derive their sense of identity from us - and vice versa.
- Societal transformation is not a matter of changing minds and hearts, political values or the sense of the good. Rather, transformation will require unleashing the positive potential inherent in relational processes. In effect, we must locate a range of relational forms that enable collective transformation as opposed to alienated dissociation. These latter implications will become more apparent as we consider rhetorical practice and social action.

Reconstituting Rhetoric

From the standpoint of relational politics, it is essential to develop alternative rhetorics. This is not because we need prettier, sharper, or more sophisticated words in which to wrap the case. I am not speaking here of a "better spin." Rather, rhetoric is important because it is itself a speech-act, a constituent feature of relationship. Because it is a form of action, rhetoric serves to form, sustain, and possibly change patterns of relationship. We have glimpsed some of the major shortcomings of traditional rhetorics - their capacities to alienate, antagonize, and escalate. Required, then, are a new range of poetics, and more specifically, poetics that invite broader fields of coordination. Let me touch on two significant openings: Rhetorics of Unity.

As we saw, many black intellectuals are now moving away from rhetorics of antagonism and separation to articulate visions of unity. This is a move highly congenial with a relational constructionism and should become a cause for all concerned with identity politics. The move from me vs. you to we has enormous consequences for relating to the polity. To illustrate, several years ago Mary and I were driving on a dangerous cliffside road in southern Europe. The rain was heavy, visibility was poor, and the traffic was treacherous. We were both highly tense, and as my driving was less than flawless, my wife became increasingly critical. Soon it was not only the road we had to fear but ourselves. We then took a new turn in our interchange. Rather than view this as “my driving,” and “her critique,” we decided to share the roles. WE would drive and WE would criticize. She became an added pair of eyes on the road, I developed a self-critical posture. The results were not only a better drive, but we didn't spoil the remainder of the day as well.

It is this kind of change in language that has stimulated Sheila McNamee, a colleague at the University of New Hampshire, and I to embark on developing a rhetoric of relational responsibility. The aim here is to develop a set of conversational resources that enable people to suspend the rhetoric of individual (or group) blame. Rather, under conditions in which blame is the invited move in the relational dance, we try to explore ways in which a relational discourse can be meaningfully employed. When problems develop, for example, how have "we" brought them about; and how are we related to others such that they are also implicated. There is no problem (for example, drug addiction, rape, depression) that can be traced to an errant individual or group. In the end, we are all implicated. As we reason, when relational metaphors are placed into action, they change the way in which "the problem" is understood, the actions which are then invited, and simultaneously the relationship among the interlocutors themselves.

Rhetorics of Incorporation. Metaphors of unity are not the only means of suturing the social realm. Our discursive traditions also leave traces of what David Goldberg (1993) calls incorporative metaphors, that is, discursive means of generating the sense of our being constituted by and with others. One of the most impressive forms of intervention in which I have ever been immersed made use of just this form of rhetoric. Constructionist therapists David Epston in New Zealand and Carl Tomm in Canada, among others, have developed an extensive mode of exploring others within - and most especially, those others with whom one is in conflict. My experience with this language took place at the beginning of a three-day conference, in which the organizers arranged a confrontation pitting radical constructivism (as represented by Ernst von Glasersfeld) against social constructionism (which I was to profess). The subsequent critiques were unsparing, the defenses unyielding, and as the audience was drawn into the debate polarization rapidly took place. Voices became agitated, critique turned ad hominem, anger and alienation mounted. As the moderator called a halt to the proceedings, I began to see the three days before me as an eternity.

Sensing the impasse of the condition, a group of family therapists, lead Karl Tomm, invited conference participants to a rump session. Here Tomm asked if von

Glazersfeld and I would be willing to be publicly interviewed. Most important, would we be willing to speak as the other? Uneasily, we agreed. Following my earlier reasoning, our exposure to each other had allowed each of us to absorb aspects of the other - intellectual views, attitudes, values - which we now carried with us as potentials. The initial question was whether we were willing and able to give these potentials credible voice. Through an extended series of questions, carefully and sensitively addressed, Tomm was able to elicit these voices. Playing the part of the other, we discussed issues of theory, views of the other, self-doubts, fears, personal relationships, feelings about the conference, and so on. The result was electrifying. The next three days were superb demonstrations of caring dialogue. No, the conflict was not resolved; no sloppy blending of the mutually exclusive. However, we did locate means of amicably exploring common concerns.

I do not believe that the expansion of the vocabularies of unity and incorporation are sufficient. We have scarcely tapped the potential of a poetics of relationship. We stand much to gain, for example, by expanding on the implications of Davies and Harre's (1990) conception of self-positioning, of Taylor's (1989) "webs of interlocution" (p.36), and of Baudrillard's (1988) selves as terminals of multiple networks. Many moves in the postmodern register also offer fertile sources of rhetorical enrichment. I think here especially of images of selves as multiple-partials, that is, selves as constituted by multiple facets, each reflecting a different domain of human conception, and each representing but a partial aspect of the whole. Here Connolly's (1991) volume, *Identity/difference*, and Judith Butler's *Gender trouble* come quickly to mind.

The Politics of Relational Practice

A transformation in theoretical resources and rhetorical practices is scarcely sufficient. Most acutely needed are innovative forms of political action. In my view, one of the most significant innovations derived from the identity politics movement was to broaden extensively the arena of the political. In particular, political practice ceased to be reserved for the arena of politics formally considered - campaigning, voting, office holding - and it ceased to be centrist - that is moving from the top down. Rather, politics moved into the arena of the local and the immediate - into the streets, the classrooms, business, and so on. Further, as we have slowly learned - particularly from feminist activists - there is no arena of daily life that is not political in implication - from the cartoons our children watch to our purchase of shampoo and shirts. In this sense, political action does not require either aggressive action or broad visibility to be effective. It seems to me that the future of relational politics might promisingly be shaped by conjoining these realizations. Most particularly, we may see relational politics as diffused (in terms of its expansion into all corners of society) and defused (in terms of reducing its aggressive or alienating posture). Politics in the relational mode should be both subtle and unceasing - not the work of specific groups on specific sites identified as "political," but the work of us all, on all fronts.

My special concern here is with forms of practice informed by or congenial with the

relational turn in constructionist theory. How can we move from argumentation, agitation and litigation to subtle and unceasing forms of inclusionary activity? What forms of practice may be generated that move away from isolation and insulation and toward the cross-fertilization of identities, the intermingling of practices, the inter-interpolation of selves, and ever-broadening forms of coordinated action? I do think such practices are possible, and indeed, there are numerous instances of just such innovation. Let me touch on only a few illustrations of what I see as relational politics in action:

- Collaborative Education. Closest to home for me is the work of an extended group of educators concerned with shifting the center of educational concern from the individual mind, to forms of relationship. As it is reasoned, rationality, memory, and motives are not assets of the individual, but are derived from and embedded within relational process. One of the central works in this domain is that of City University Professor, Kenneth Bruffee. In his volume, *Collaborative learning*, Bruffee outlines a series of pedagogical practices designed to reduce the monologic voice of authority in the classroom, the elitist vocabulary, and the univocal or "one right answer." (See also, van Dijk, 1989). For example, his classes in English literature are often built around consensus groups, which groups are challenged with answering in their own terms questions posed by various texts - questions that also invite the students to challenge the received opinions of authorities in the field. Struck by Bruffee's work, I have also extended it in some of my own classes by having small groups of students meet between classes to determine what kinds of questions are most significant to ask. As the process unfolds a mutual inhabitation often occurs, wherein significant ideas within the written works come to live with the students, but fashioned by the discursive practices brought by the students from their communal contexts.
- Family Therapy. The family therapy movement has had substantial success in shifting the focus from defective individuals to systemic processes. Now, strongly influenced by constructionist writings, the field has become focally concerned with the co-construction of meaning in therapy, in families and communities. The shift is away from who or what is defective, to how it is we come to interpret life patterns as defective and what alternative forms of construction may enable relations to proceed more congenially. Therapy, then, is not intent on locating evil and correcting it, but on coordinating meanings within relationships such that the evil is rendered obsolete. I could draw on dozens of citations here, but in the present context will simply commend to you the innovative work on therapeutic narratives of Peggy Penn and Marilyn Frankfurt at the Ackerman Institute on 78th St.
- Community Focused Institutes. I am also compelled by the attempt of many therapeutically oriented institutes to move outward into community work - not in the name of a specific political advocacy, but for purposes of crossing boundaries of divided discourse and value. Prominent, for example, is the work of Sallyann Roth and Laura and Richard Chasin at the Family Institute of Cambridge, where the attempt has been to bring together leaders from

warring ideological camps - for example, pro choice and pro life, or straights and gays. The purpose of these interchanges is not to champion one cause over the other, not to impugn the intelligibility of either tradition, or to dismiss the conflict. Rather, by suppressing various forms of divisive rhetoric, and simultaneously giving voice to narratives of lived experience ("my experience with abortion," "what it is like for me to be gay,"), the attempt is to open a way of incorporating the other, of appreciating the situated character of the perspectives in question. No, the ideological conflict is not thereby dissolved, but the outcome appears to be far more humane modes of relating to the other. I also think here of the impressive work of Fred Newman, Lois Holzman and others at the East Side Institute here in New York. Going far beyond therapeutic practice the institute helps ghetto youth to organize talent shows, offers public dialogues between blacks and Jews, and helps run a multi-racial elementary school in Harlem.

- Appreciative Inquiry. In the domain of organizational management, David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western Reserve, have developed a form of organizational intervention called appreciative inquiry. When organizations confront conflict - between management and workers, men and women, blacks and whites and so on - appreciative inquiry shifts the focus from who is right and wrong, fostering tolerance, or developing rules of proper conduct, to modes of collaborative action. More specifically the attempt is to work with the organization to locate instances of desirable or ideal relations - cases in which groups work well and effectively with each other. Further, as these appreciated instances are brought into public consciousness, the organization is brought into discussion of the kind of future they might build around such cases. In the very process of instancing the positive, and forging an image of a desirable future, the divisive constructions lose their suasive capacity.

These relational innovations - in collaborative education, social therapy, community action, and organizational intervention - have all been party to constructionist dialogues. However, there are additional movements of note, which are not so much informed by relational conceptions as they are congenial. Here I would include the enormous growth over the past decade of private voluntary organizations - grassroots organizations devoted to humane and life giving practices. There are now some 20,000 of these organizations operating on a transnational basis, coordinating participants from around the globe in reducing hunger, curing disease, controlling AIDS, saving the environment, helping children to survive, and so on. The mushrooming of virtual communities also represent a contribution to relational politics. There are now almost five million users of the inter-net, a large proportion of which take part in small, loosely linked communities of meaning. Cutting across racial, ethnic, age, gender, geographical, and religious lines such communities enable dialogue on innumerable issues, both profound and personal. I am also impressed with the attempt toward full ecumenicalism among world religions - as realized, for example in the recent Parliament of World Religions. This meeting, in Chicago, brought together 8,000 people from 150 faiths around the globe into mutual inquiry.

In each of these cases, the signifiers cross boundaries and begin to play in new arenas.

In conclusion, I am not proposing here that we abandon previous traditions of identity politics, the discourses of oppression, justice, equality, rights and so on, nor the in your face activism that we have come to know so well (See, Sampson, 1993b for a positive account of traditional identity politics at work). The point is not to eradicate existing vocabularies of action. Rather, my hope is that we are now participating in the generation of a new vocabulary, a new consciousness, and a new range of practices - a relational politics that will be incorporative, pervasive, collaborative, and unceasing. As Lesbian feminist, Shane Phelan (1989), proposes, "identity politics must be based not only on identity, but on an appreciation for politics as the art of living together."(p.170). Relational politics is precisely the attempt to realize this art.

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