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Introduction: Prelude to Definitive Elaborations

Anti-essentialist social constructionist identity politics is becoming institutionalized in literary studies. The same could be said of other areas of academic study, across the humanities and the social sciences. Indeed the same could be said of a wide range of political, social, and cultural formations in our time. That the second part of this book is addressed primarily to the institutional practice of literary studies is a convenience, or rather is to demarcate an examinable ground on which such institutionalization can be demonstrated. I am convinced that it can also be demonstrated for other grounds; the case of literary studies in this regard is symptomatic of a larger phenomenon.

This book is written because I have misgivings about the implications of institutionalizing identity politics, as understood here, anywhere at all. These misgivings do not arise from an essentialist position; the critique of identity politics offered here is from within anti-essentialist commitments and social constructionist convictions. By ‘identity politics’ I always mean the anti-essentialist social constructionist variety in this study.

Identity politics is understood here in a rather narrow sense which needs delineation. Part I of this book is devoted, at some length, to clarifying what I understand by identity politics. This part is not addressed specifically to literary studies or to literary analysis; this discussion is undertaken mainly in terms of political and cultural analysis. Part II examines the institutionalization of identity politics in literary studies and the implications thereof.

Identity and identity politics are prodigiously discussed and debated terms, with an enormous variety of philosophical, social, and political nuances and applications. Though customary in academic writing, I do not attempt to provide a survey here of so complex a field. I begin
instead with a brief statement of what I think identity politics is, in the narrow sense which applies here. This statement of identity politics may or may not conform to prevailing expectations – I expect, at some level, it will, or at any rate will resonate with current expectations.

Identity politics works through perceived analogues and equivalences between different identity-based political positions, and seeks thereby to extend its reach across and embrace different identity-based political positions. Identity-based political positions that are thus embraced within identity politics are centred on and among those who can embody those political positions. To embody an identity-based political position implies the following: only those who can identify themselves with or are identified with a particular identity-based collective can authentically and authoritatively assume the political position appropriate to that particular collective. Identity-based political positions are thus largely confined to those who can embody those positions; identity politics extends across such confines by exploring analogues and equivalences between different identity-based political positions, but without disturbing the logic of embodiment in identity-based political positions.

A crucial distinction is made, and relationship is drawn, here between ‘identity politics’ and ‘identity-based political positions’. In everyday communication the phrase ‘identity politics’ is often used – approvingly and pejoratively – to connote what I call ‘identity-based political positions’ here. In academic writings ‘identity politics’ is usually interchangeably and confusingly used for both what I call ‘identity-based political positions’ and what I think of as ‘identity politics’ here. This study departs from the obfuscations of both current common usage and academic usage by insisting on the distinction between ‘identity politics’ and ‘identity-based political positions’. The above statement presents the distinction but does not in itself fully explain what the distinction consists in or why it is crucial. The explanation comes hereafter.

That brief italicized statement may look and sound like a definition, but is not one. It seems to be conventional to give definitions in emphatic brief statements like that, employing an abstract and decontextualized register – whereby, as Alvin Gouldner had observed, a powerful social stratum of intellectuals validates and extends its cultural capital and assumes a (new) class character.1 That the play of identity can be attributed where it seems to be most explicitly disavowed is a widely debated problem that this study addresses at the appropriate juncture. More to the moment, it seems to me arguable that such a brief italicized statement exacerbates rather than alleviates incomprehension, and appears to confine its address to select cognoscenti (smaller