



The Critique and Politics of Identity: On the Affinities between Critical Theory and Poststructuralism. A Conversation with Bernard E. Harcourt and Martin Saar conducted by Sarah Bianchi

BERNARD E. HARCOURT, MARTIN SAAR AND SARAH BIANCHI

New York, Frankfurt a.M. and Frankfurt a.M.

We know what Michel Foucault, the leading poststructuralist thinker, said about early Critical Theory: “Perhaps if I had read those works earlier, I would have saved useful time, surely”¹. Much has already been written about the relation between poststructuralism and Critical Theory, well-known are the objections advanced in particular by the second and third generation of the Frankfurt School against poststructuralism, especially against its alleged relativism. The aim here, however, is to explore the potential affinities and their relevance today. To this end, it is instructive to have a conversation with two key thinkers in the field, Martin Saar and Bernard E. Harcourt. Martin Saar holds the chair for social philosophy at Goethe-University in Frankfurt and Bernard E. Harcourt is the Isidor and Seville Sulzbacher Professor of Law and Professor of Political Sciences at Columbia University in New York. Critical Theory and poststructuralism play a key role in both of their work.

Sarah Bianchi: To begin with, let us first clear the ground and specify what we are talking about when it comes to Critical Theory and poststructuralism. Martin, can you say what your perspective on these questions is?

Martin Saar: We might start with some clarification of the terms because in both cases the supposed protagonists of the “schools” or movements did not really consider themselves to be part of a “school” or movement at all and in both cases this is very much a retrospective attribution of a coherence to an intellectual tendency. So, the poststructuralists didn’t know that they were such because the term hardly existed at the time they were writing. But, as many commentators and intellectual historians have

¹ Foucault, Michel (1991). *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*. New York: Semiotext(e), 119.



shown, it makes sense as a working description to call poststructuralism a loose movement of theoretical developments that originated more or less in the late 1960s, finding their high time in the 1970s and early 1980s, and that had only developed into a fully-fledged academic paradigm by the mid-1990s. Well-known figures from what was then and still is called “theory” (instead of “philosophy”) at the time retroactively coined the term “poststructuralism” (also as an alternative to “postmodernism”) as the name for a group of people from Lacan to Lyotard to Deleuze to Foucault to Derrida (and some others at the side like Baudrillard or Michel Serres, some might also include Louis Althusser and Roland Barthes). And there have been several different specifications, deconstruction maybe being the most prominent in terms of an academic school.

The same holds true for Critical Theory. The name “Critical Theory” – with a capital C – is attached most of the time to the 1930s and 1940s authors belonging to what after the 1960s has been called the “Frankfurt School”, and we have different generations here. But the most important point is that attributing a theoretical coherence to these people only makes sense retroactively. So, Horkheimer, who was not the founding, but the first most influential director of the Institute for Social Research that was founded almost exactly 100 years ago, was trying to build an interdisciplinary research program in which the very term “Critical Theory” played a specific role after the mid-1930s. In a way, it was nothing but a code word for a theoretical orientation from the Marxist tradition; and only in the 1960s in the German context did this become the proper name of a theoretical movement always tied to certain figures – Horkheimer and especially Adorno, but also Marcuse, Fromm, Kirchheimer, Pollock, a little later Benjamin – and also tied to the Institute for Social Research as its originating site. But already in the beginning, it had different developments which then translated into different disciplinary contexts.

In the German context we have seen a debate and polemic against what was then called “postmodern” thinking in the 1980s, also fueled by some proponents of the Frankfurt School, and some of these polemics still exist today. From the perspective of my generation, the divide between poststructuralism and Critical Theory has softened, and for many of us it is more important to see the many affinities between the two movements and the parallels in rejecting a certain kind of idealist vision of human nature, human history and human society. Therefore, for me and for many others, poststructuralism also is a branch of “critical theories” in the lower case, a philosophy or social theory critical of its time and its social environment.

An interesting, startling development is that both paradigms have today encountered a new common enemy, namely people who claim Critical Theory, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and Marxism in general to be the theoretical origins of all the ills and impasses of contemporary politics, most recently for instance in a



book-length pamphlet called *Cynical Theories*. This has to do with the charge of relativism and the charge of overpoliticization of academia and science. And in this case, the two sides find themselves surprisingly grouped together by their enemies.

SB: Thank you. And Bernard, you often speak of contemporary critical thought. What do you mean by this and how does it relate to the theoretical approach which Martin just described?

Bernard E. Harcourt: I use the term “contemporary critical thought” thought – without capitals and with “thought” instead of “theory” – precisely to highlight what Martin just referred to regarding the affinities and the productivity of those affinities. I would add that I use the term contemporary critical to include not only poststructuralism and Frankfurt school critical theory, but also to include other branches of critical thought such as critical race theory, postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, feminist critical theory, queer theory and now trans* theory and abolition feminism as well. So, I use the term as a larger framework to include what I consider to be broader critical forms of thought and praxis; and I use that term as a way to avoid any confusion with the narrower conception of what Martin beautifully defined in terms of the heritage of the Frankfurt school. I do this to allow for a space of productive exchange.

The next question is what binds contemporary critical thought. I would propose three dimensions. First, a suspicious attitude toward how we come to know the world and social relations. This traces to the hermeneutics of suspicion from the nineteenth century and to the work of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud. A common thread in these different strands of contemporary critical thought, whether it is postcolonialism and its critique of orientalism or queer theory and its troubling of gender, is a suspicious attitude toward how we come to know the world. Second, a desire to demystify: the suspicious attitude gives rise to a desire to unveil illusions, to demystify, in order, third, to achieve a form of emancipation and solidarity.

Naturally, all those terms are loaded and complicated, and much of our conversation has to be precisely about those expressions and ambitions. Emancipation, for instance: do we use the term emancipation or liberation? Those are contested terms. Foucault had a critique of liberation. Do we use terms like ideology or knowledge-power, or regimes of truth, or afterlives? All those terms are slightly different. But I don't think it's in the differences, so much as in the affinities, that we can move forward toward a way of thinking that probes what we might call, following Foucault, knowledge, power, and subjectivity. It is that triangle, with an emancipatory goal and an attention to praxis, that captures the affinities between these different critical approaches. It's what allows us to use them copiously, in conversation with each other, to find the reflections and the contestations. It's essential not to elide the contradictions, which are often so productive. But I think the term “contemporary critical thought” offers a better way to



think through these different traditions and genealogies and how they speak to each other.

SB: One further common feature between poststructuralism and Critical Theory can be seen in their styles of thinking. Some years ago, when Bernard gave his seminar series “Critique 13/13” in Frankfurt at the Institute of Social Research with Martin as his guest, we discussed Adorno’s inaugural lecture “The Actuality of Philosophy”². Martin, concerning this text you emphasized Adorno’s theme of “the now of philosophy” and connected it to poststructuralist thought, especially to Deleuze. This theme, as well as the similar term “Zeitdiagnose”, is not foreign to Foucault’s thinking, in particular to his understanding of the “history of the present”. “History of the present” implies the important view that philosophy can enable us to make the connection between history and present times thinkable and experiential. Can you tell us a little bit about this topos, about the connection between philosophy and its time?

MS: So, yes, one motif I find strikingly similar. This is the idea that philosophical activity is necessarily related to “Zeitdiagnose”, diagnosing the present. And for Critical Theory, this is crystal clear because of its theoretical heritages, namely on the one hand defining philosophy itself as critique in a Kantian vein and understanding the goal of reflection as a theoretical enterprise, and on the other hand philosophy as analyzing actually existing societies in order to criticize and transform them, and that is the Marxian heritage. Both of these heritages lead to the idea that philosophy itself is the art of diagnosing the present. The German term “Zeitdiagnose” is carrying exactly that kind of self-understanding of philosophy as a temporal and analytical enterprise that is trying via theoretical reflection to gain some critical distance to the very “now” and trying to think it through, knowing that the very ground on which thinking itself stands is, of course, itself part of the historical and social totality. This is a very interesting idea and besides the Kantian it has some Hegelian connotations, for instance, that reflection is an activity that has to arise immanently from the very conditions in which it emerges, but that it also has a certain kind of potential to transcend – but only a little bit! – the given that it reflects on. This little distance that you can develop offers or opens up the space for critique. Nietzsche has a famous aphorism that to see how tall the towers in the city are, you have to leave the city and view it from afar. This is a version of this idea of critical distance and that there has to be some methodological way of gaining a perspective on what is conditioning you. But this stance still remains in a deep continuity with what you yourself are and have become. This is a fascinating topos that I find beautifully developed in Adorno’s inaugural lecture “Die Aktualität der Philosophie”, where it finds a more methodological expression when he says: This also means that philosophy cannot stand alone but it has to take recourse to sociological work, to the actual

² See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hKNN_FV8Gw



empirical description and analysis of really existing societies. But in a way it is the basic idea that philosophy, when it is critical, is critical of exactly the kind of surroundings in which it finds itself. This is also a thought we find in Foucault in many places.

SB: And in this context it is very interesting that philosophy in the “Zeitdiagnose” sense also has something to do with praxis, whatever the concrete connection may be. This point, the connection between philosophy, theory and praxis, was also a key element of our discussions in Frankfurt and directly relates to your latest book, Bernard, *Critique and Praxis*. Foucault always underlined that it is not theory he is doing, but analytics. How do you see the connection between the two poles, of theory and praxis, in the light of Adorno and Foucault?

BEH: Let me pick up precisely from where Martin left off, namely the affinities between Adorno’s inaugural lecture from 1931 and Foucault, specifically his text on “What Is Enlightenment?” where he traces an attitude of modernity back to Kant. That strand leads Foucault to formulate a powerful form of “Zeitdiagnose” which we now tend to call “the history of the present”. But parallel to that, there is also an attitude of modernity we could trace to Marx. It would be an attitude that constantly focuses on the emancipatory dimension, the question of liberation, solidarity, and the effort to transform the world. I would argue it’s those two attitudes, both of them, twined, that shape contemporary critical thought.

That’s the effort I’ve been involved with for a few years now through [the 13/13 seminars](#) and the book *Critique and Praxis*. The corrective, if any, is to highlight the attitude of modernity that traces to Marx without necessarily bringing in his philosophy of history, but to probe, question, and push the relationship between critique and praxis. In a way, to move our discussion from *Krise und Kritik*, which was the formative moment of Critical Theory, to *Critique and Praxis*. That’s in part what we will do in our seminar when we discuss Hans-Jürgen Krahl’s writings and the SDS German student movement.

In this effort, we can find guidance in many critical thinkers of the earlier generations. So for instance, if one turns back to the work of Foucault during the period of the early 1970s, he is participating in the *Group d’information sur les prisons* (“GIP”), at the same time as he is writing *Surveiller et Punir*, and publishing tracts such as the series “*Intolérable*” at Gallimard. That was a remarkable constellation, during those years, in which his and the praxis of the GIP were interacting with his critical theorizing – also in his lectures at the Collège de France on *The Punitive Society*. It would be like Adorno, not focusing on 1969 when he calls the police, but rather looking at 1931, or the early 1940s at Columbia, and trying to see how critique and praxis related there.

MS: If I may just add one thought: Interestingly, in their own time, both of them were attacked for not combining theory and practice in a coherent way because both were



surrounded by more or less dogmatic Marxists who thought there can be a theoretical solution to the question of the relation of theory and praxis and you could have the right theory mapping on to the right revolutionary praxis. Adorno and Foucault in extremely different methodological ways were contesting exactly that kind of optimism or “solutionism”, the idea that there can be something like a real, dialectical or theoretical mediation between the two; they were both insisting on a certain moment of heterogeneity or dissonance between theory and praxis, while also emphasizing that they still have to go together.

BEH: Yes, and with Foucault, that also raises the fascinating question how the earlier period of critique and praxis in the 1970s relates to the later work on practices of the self during the 1980s. In the earlier period, what is particularly compelling is that the praxis is so consonant with the theoretical work and the theoretical work is in conversation with the praxis. Regarding the GIP, for instance, Foucault was invited originally to conduct a popular tribunal on the prison, but refused, proposing instead to help create a space to allow for the voice of persons who were incarcerated to be heard; this was consonant, theoretically, with a discourse analysis that understands how discourses are formed or not, heard or not, become legible or not – and, of course, here we need to think with Gayatri Spivak’s critique of ventriloquism, and the many productive conversations with Deleuze, Benny Lévi and others. It is at those particular moments that I find it most productive to think about the way in which critique conflicts with, but also nourishes particular practices, and vice versa, how practices nourish the critique. Of course you see that powerfully in *Discipline and Punish* where Foucault acknowledges how the experience of working with the GIP, the experience of visiting Attica, etc., nourished his critical apparatus.

MS: Yes, it is not a deduction, it’s not that a practice follows from a theoretical construction.

BEH: Right, and that’s where it becomes interesting to explore other critical thinkers, especially those who had a more engaged relationship to praxis, such as Hans-Jürgen Krahl. Is there something different with someone who considers themselves an activist thinker? Does it create a different relationship between theory and praxis?

SB: And one of these activist thinkers, if I may say that, is you, Bernard. And this leads me to the next question because you also combine theory and practice. When you’re not teaching as a professor at Columbia University, you are a pro bono advocate, and recently you represented Mr. Nasser, a Guantanamo detainee, who was then the first detainee freed under the Biden administration. Can you tell us how you understand your activities and the relationship between theory and praxis?



BEH: Well, we are each marked by our own biographies even if we try, as critical thinkers, to avoid the biographical and the coherence of the notion of the author. In my case, I became a litigator at an early juncture in my career and began representing people on death row in Alabama, and moved down there for work, before turning back to critical theory. That produced a form of political praxis for me that remains deeply paradoxical and problematic because, at the heart of it, there is always the contradiction between liberal legalism and the notion of the rule of law on the one hand and critical theory and praxis on the other. What this means is that I'm often placed in a situation, representing for instance Abdul Latif Nasser, who was detained at Guantanamo for 20 years, or someone who is on death row in Alabama, where I need to use the specific tools of legal liberalism that I critique the most. Theoretically, I have developed over the years a profound critique of those juridical structures. They represent one of the greatest myths in the West right now, the myth of the rule of law. And yet in my praxis, I often have no other tools to deploy but those very rights and processes I critique.

SB: Yes, and I would like to return to the understanding of praxis as critique: Martin, you have shown in your work that early Critical Theory and poststructuralism, namely Foucault, share the central topos of understanding critique as an effective tool for detecting relations of domination and of power, also in hidden forms. How do you see their understanding of power?

MS: Bernard has pointed to something like a common gesture at the heart of both schools of thought, namely their demystification of what is given, and I think this is true and this leads to the heart of the Marxian heritage in both traditions. This involves seeing society not as natural, but as made; and being made under human or social conditions means being made by someone or something, being an "effect" or a product of something. And I think a very broad notion of power is the name for exactly that thing or instance that makes other things. In that sense one might say that most of the demystifying on the theoretical plane takes the form of showing which makes what, and who makes who and what. This means reading the given society as a field of struggle, power, antagonism and domination. Marx in a way was the master of doing this in a specific field; and one could say that the many different critical theories are all suggesting new versions of what this means and how this could be done and operationalized. All of them in that sense are "critiques of power", as my former teacher Axel Honneth has said, because this is what they do; they analyze and in that sense also demystify or denaturalize systems of power as man-made, society-made. History and social factors create people who behave, live, think and feel the way they do. In that sense, demystification or denaturalization is the basic gesture of critical theories in the Frankfurt sense – and in the Paris sense.



And just to indicate what this could mean: First, showing that people, are also “products” of power implies that the ideas they have are a product of power; and this is the traditional field of the theory of ideology, toward which both of these critical theorists we are talking about, Adorno and Foucault, somehow are still oriented even if they both explicitly reject the received conceptualization of ideology. Foucault’s notion of “power/knowledge” from the early 70s clearly is something like a stand-in for what formerly was called ideology. And it has nothing to do with the classical, say, Lukácsian theory of ideology as necessarily false consciousness. The second point seems even more important. Both of them believe that the way human bodies are constituted is also deeply historical, deeply made, deeply artificial, deeply social. Adorno provides incredibly interesting reflections, namely in the *Minima Moralia*, on the historicity and the sociality of bodily reactions and bodily behavior. And this sometimes sounds very contemporary because he already formulates the idea that social conventions and power structures are deeply embodied and incorporated.

And we could name a third realm of interesting suggestions, the affective realm; and this is something you are also very much interested in, Sarah. The idea that even how our psychic and emotional reactions operate is nothing natural, nothing given, but also a dimension of social and historical and also interindividual conditions and interactions, likewise has a demystifying effect. One would have thought that the very way we feel is more connected to the natural, and therefore uncontrollable, part of our personalities, whereas social science, social anthropology, social history have shown that affective and emotional dispositions have always been deeply artificial and deeply constructed in the long course of the history of civilization. And Adorno and Foucault describe convincingly on the theoretical and historical level how human behavior is also conditioned, influenced and governed by way of affective power.

BEH: Let me just jump in because that’s fascinating. The mention of psychology is important here, particularly now that we have the early texts by the young Foucault that were engaged with “Daseinsanalyse”, Ludwig Binswanger’s approach to phenomenological psychoanalysis, or what he called existential analysis, and the relation between phenomenology and psychology. This early work highlights the place of experience in Foucault’s thought. The notion of experience is so formative to Foucault, it comes from psychology and phenomenology, and it plays a similar role to notions of affect, or emotion, for other thinkers. For Foucault, it begins with the notion of experience and it ends with the notions of subjectivity, subjectivation, subject formation, which is tied to experience, of course, but represents a real arc or thread throughout Foucault’s work. It is right on point for anyone who is interested in affect theory or theories of emotions.



MS: There would be an interesting and fascinating parallel in Adorno for whom the notion of experience also had a fundamental status; and even if we might think that for a Hegelian experience is the name for immediacy, for Adorno it is not. And therefore this term for him holds no positivist or naturalist connotations, even if many people used the term in that way. In Foucault it is a similar thing; experience is a complex and irreducible notion.

BEH: For Foucault, it's the moment in 1953 and 1954, the encounter with Binswanger and Husserl, when the theme and concept of the experience become so formative. They offer a way of interpreting Foucault's entire project of writing, the idea of him himself going through an experience that would transform and de-subjectify him, as he said, but also of creating experiences for the reader to transform themselves. The texts operate through transformations that result from encountering different experiences or ways of living, about sexuality for instance, or in the case of discipline, different forms of punishment.

MS: And we have read this through the Bataille lens, I think. Bataille is extremely important for this, but it's not the only source. So, there is, as you say, the phenomenological and also psychological dimension of this, which cannot entirely be articulated within the Bataille register, and this is, I think, also something that is important to reperspectivize, also in terms of the early sources.

SB: And speaking of affects, let me come back to a point that Martin brought up when he spoke of critique in terms of the Nietzschean notion of leaving a town in order to see the city from another perspective. Nietzsche calls this movement "changing perspectives" because subjects are then able to gain distance from the contexts within which they were hitherto located. In another image he varies the motif of leaving a town to the motif of hiking in the mountains of Sils Maria. The point is quite the same. One does so in order to have a different view from the hill than from the valley.

If we now come to the matter of affects, we cannot just go up and leave our affects like one leaves a valley. The shadow follows the wanderer wherever he goes, as Nietzsche says in his text *The Wanderer and his Shadow*. If we stay with this imagery, this would mean that although one leaves a valley in terms of the concrete place, nonetheless the ideas, memories, habits, etc. one got to know in that specific valley still remain in one's ways of thinking, experiencing and feeling. And it is the affects' effect that makes people so deeply open to automatically adapting to the set of norms one is used to in life. So, this mode of seeing affects from the Nietzschean perspective was further developed by Foucault and is not so different from Adorno's view; with respect to affects, for these authors, it is clear that we need another kind of critique in order to create a distance from one's current context. And one key way of doing so can be seen in the fundamental method of genealogical critique that was developed by Nietzsche. This method, as we



know, seeks to shed light on the historicity of norms by questioning their value for present life. Such a genealogical method can highlight the modes in and through which subjects were trained to affectively bind themselves to a specific set of norms; and in doing so it promises to conceptualize how subjects can become aware of their own attachment to the set of norms. Thus, genealogical critique can also describe how subjects have the potential to gain new views on their way of living, feeling and thinking or experiencing life by enlightening themselves about their own affects in their experiential life situation.

And turning now to today's experiences – we just talked about experiences – one of the most contested experiences is the experience of identity, I would say. This brings us to the debate on identity politics. That is, I think, one of the most important struggles today. Martin and Bernard, you have both worked on this topic. Bernard, can you describe what this term means for you?

BEH: Yes, of course there is a deep connection between experience and identity. It would be important, though, to distinguish identity from identity politics. The latter, identity politics, is probably one of the most maligned terms today, attacked from all sides, from the right and the left, including from critical thinkers who are themselves accused of identity politics, such as my colleagues at Columbia, Kendall Thomas, who helped found critical race theory, or Jack Halberstam, who has contributed so importantly to theorizing queer and trans rebellion. They both urge us to move away from identity politics.

But I confess, I would like to rehabilitate it in the following careful way. First, the notion of identity politics reflects the way in which identities politicize us. That was at the root of the writings of the Combahee River Collective in 1977. Their statement was the first place where the term “identity politics” was ever used. And when they coined it, it represented for them the way they had been politicized, because they were a collective of black, feminist, socialist, lesbian women who had been marked by their identities. Second, there is no doubt that we are politicized by identities, often identities that are imposed on us, identities that we might embrace or resist. Many people cannot simply escape identities, because they are actually treated differently by other people because of those identities. They may be profiled, even assaulted or killed, because of them. Third, identities inevitably relate to those other terms we were just discussing – subjectivity, self, reflexivity. The common thread through all of them, including practices of the self, subjectification and de-subjectification, is the notion of who we are at a particular moment in time. Not rigidly, but fluidly. And then fourth, identities have always been important in left politics. They were important in working class politics. Those too are forms of identities that were politicizing.



So, the term itself, identity, may be problematic because it comes from 'idem', from the idea of staying the same. But today it's no longer a question of staying the same, it is a question of subjectivity and de-subjectivation. The challenge is how to have a productive relationship to questions of subjectivity and not use it as a source of exclusion, but instead as a source of coalition building. The challenge is to develop a politics that moves fluidly from being to becoming.

MS: I would think along similar lines. Let me just note how deeply ironic it is that the theoretical paradigms we defend here are now seen as the intellectual origin of identity politics (however narrowly conceived by its critics). I guess we always rather thought that poststructuralism and critical theories were nothing else than identity critique. This must be true because their acts of denaturalization or demystification mostly concern identities; so all these demystifying and denaturalizing arguments that we were talking about directly attack the idea that people have stable selves and have identities that define them. And, of course, poststructuralism in that sense was always trying to fight against an essentialism about identities. And for Critical Theory it is the same. The most important term of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* is the non-identical, "das Nicht-Identische"; and therefore it is ironic that we now have to intervene into a debate about the politics of identity (of course this is what politics is also about), where it is said that identity politics is bad (as if it were avoidable) and these theories are affirming it.

One needs to sort out the terminological issues a little bit differently than many commentators are inclined to do. On a certain level identity politics is absolutely inevitable. Our identities are shaped by politics and the shaping of identities is the realm, or the medium, or the register, the space of the political proper. The making of political subjectivities, of political identities, is what politics is all about; it's creating classifications, groups or "kinds" of people, as Ian Hacking said, and this is what a Foucauldian and an Adornian will also try to problematize as a crucial realm where power is exercised. And therefore a Foucauldian or a Critical Theorist would say, identity politics is done all the time. So, if you think you cannot do identity politics, you're wrong because then you are still doing it but without acknowledging its bias for this one unacknowledged identity – mostly white, male, healthy, Western. Therefore, politicizing the very question of identity is exactly what we have to do as theorists of complex societies and their complex power structures and dynamics. And in the course of doing that we also have to find a new language and a new way of speaking about the resources for the creation of new and different identities – but then we also have to talk about specific experiences. And then we are interested in making experiences and identities that are other and more inclusive, more just, more plural, more sensitive to difference – but this will also and still be a matter of identities.



BEH: Yes, particularly pressing is to trace the genealogy of identities and subjectivities in relation to contemporary identity politics. It goes back again to the point about power you were making earlier, Martin. The right-wing critique of identity politics pushes us towards a space where power and identities are elided, hidden from view, with the notion of “colorblindness” for instance. But it is precisely if we embrace forms of non-power or non-identity that we make the universalizing move that ends up being identitarian insofar as it essentially turns the white heterosexual male into the norm that hides everything else, both in the context of power and in the context of identity. And so, the task is to develop a productive notion of identity politics that draws on the full genealogy of the notion of identity and the critique of the naturalization of human nature and of identities, and holds on to an idea of the fluidities and practices of transgressing identities, as a way to move toward coalition building and forms of cooperation.

MS: I think for both of us, this would mean reading and understanding identity through experiences and practices, for example through practices of coalition building, and not reading identity through or as sameness, or through or as essence. There is a poststructuralist or Critical Theory way of thinking identity that is neither essentialist nor ahistorical nor identitarian, but it remains a thinking of – localized, contextualized, social – identity. It conceives of identity, let’s say, praxeologically, or experientially, and this would also be a lesson that we have learnt from poststructuralism and Critical Theory concerning overly-abstract or too formal theoretical constructions. I think this is really important for contemporary political debates because even after all the necessary critiques of the identitarian in politics, we don’t want to lose the powerful tools and resources of collective identities in forging new political and progressive struggles. We have to mobilize certain subjects, certain individuals, certain identities to join these coalitions or struggles, and this will not be a matter of abstract or purely procedural norms or institutions but of finding the “souls”, i.e. the real and concrete subjects and identities who do that.

SB: And also this point of identity politics, I think, shows the necessity of considering the notion of affects in both Adorno and Foucault, which we’ve already spoken about. For their notion of affects can make it plausible on a theoretical plane that people may have a desire to subordinate themselves to dominating norms, especially norms of identity formation. The problematic effects of this subordination lie particularly in the fact that people subjugate themselves to norms that in many ways may not correspond to their developmental desires. Important roots of this linking may be found in Hegel. Hegel was the thinker who underscored the necessity of intersubjective and recognition-based experiences for the development of people’s consciousness and in this we can see an important element of proper identity formation. And speaking of the experiences of identity, one of the most fascinating movements of our time fighting for the recognition



of experienced identity is the Movement for Black Lives. Bernard, can you tell us a bit about the link between contemporary problems of identity politics and this great movement of our time, the Movement for Black Lives?

BEH: Well, I think that the Movement for Black Lives is perhaps the best demonstration today of the importance of thinking about identities in a productive and fluid way. It has been the most powerful social movement of the 21st century in the United States, involving the 2020 summer protests after the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, as well as the earlier protests in 2014 following the police killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson and of Eric Garner in Staten Island, and of many other persons of color. If working class politics was the effective form of transformative politics in the 19th and parts of the 20th centuries, then the Movement for Black Lives has been the most transformative movement of the 21st century so far. It has brought, remarkably, the greatest number of people into the streets, approximately 30 million people in the United States according to some counts, and globally as well. It demonstrates that, today, we need to be thinking about identity politics in a constructive and productive way.

At the heart of the movement are theoretical constructs that have questions of identity at their heart, whether they implicate theories of white supremacy or of anti-blackness, which are importantly different. Frank Wilderson's writings on anti-blackness spotlight a different way in which black identity is constructed as persistently and so brutally placed at the bottom of the social order, in a way that white supremacy doesn't. White supremacy has a tendency to create an amalgam of non-white persons. But all of these contested theories are extremely productive for us to rethink identities, to do coalition work, to engage in critique and praxis. And that is our greatest challenge today.